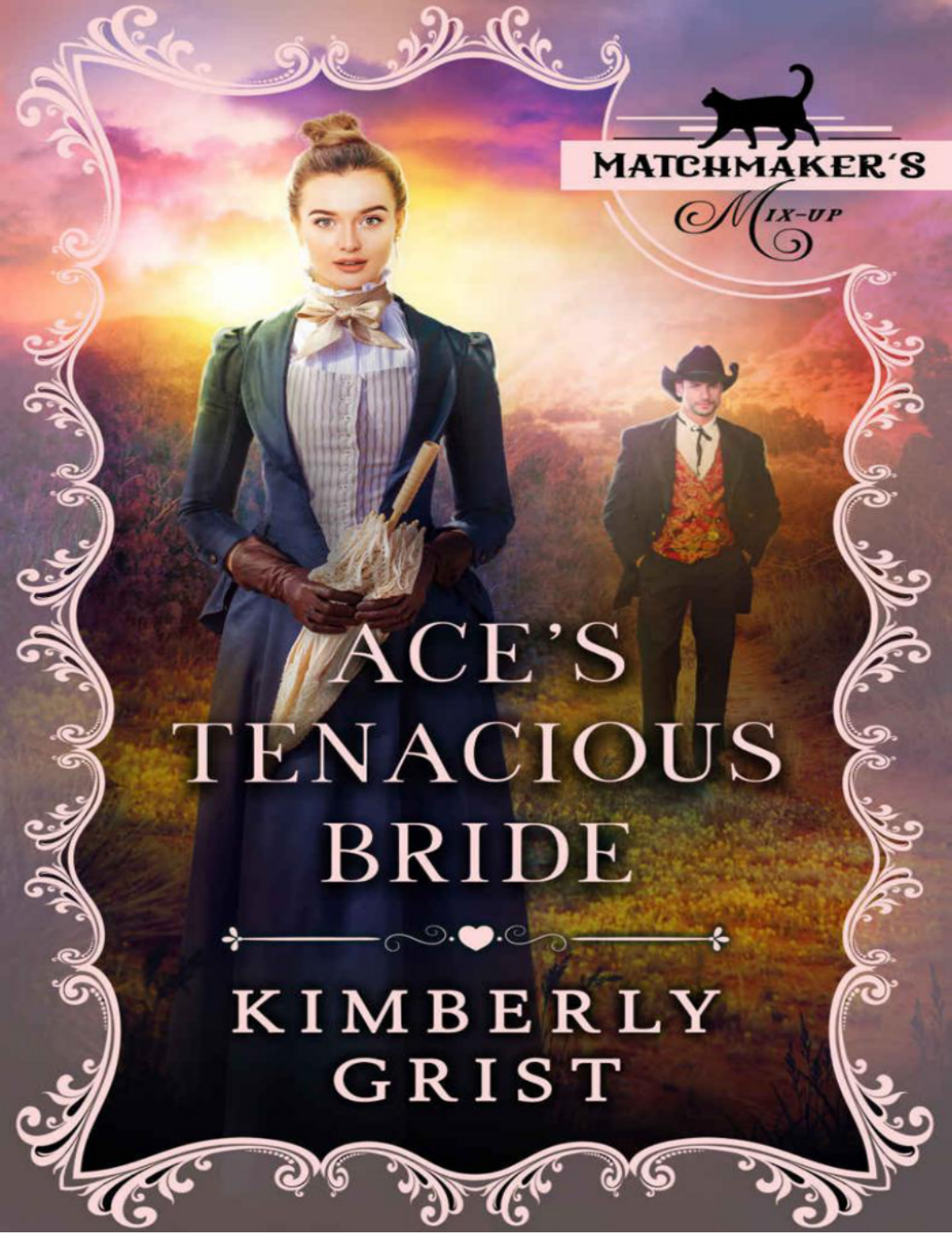
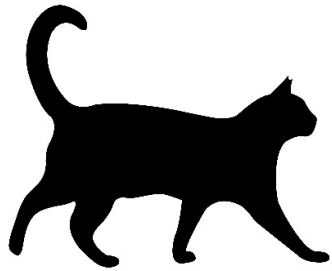

MATCHMAKER'S
MIX-UP
ACE'S TENACIOUS BRIDE
KIMBERLY GRIST

Ace's Tenacious Bride

By Kimberly Grist

Book 13 of The Matchmaker's Mix Up



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“Justice is when we get what we deserve. Mercy is when we don’t get what we deserve.”

Prologue

Chicago, 1870.

Standing with her hands on her hips, eighteen-year-old Maggie Shoemaker gasped at the sight of the ordinarily tidy den. Newspaper ads and letters from clients for her grandmother’s successful matchmaking business lay in disarray from one end to the other.

The family cat meowed, jumped from his perch, then circled her skirt in greeting. “You needn’t look so pleased with yourself, Cleo. If you hadn’t made this huge mess, Grandmother would not be upstairs in bed suffering from apoplexy.”

Tapping her finger on her cheek, she circled the room dodging the papers, and murmured, “I can’t let Grandmother down or the people who have already paid for the service. How hard can this be? I’ll start by reviewing the questionnaires. Fortunately for me, Grandmother makes meticulous notes.”

Cleo followed, leaping onto the mahogany desk, then settled in for another nap. Maggie pulled open the center drawer but found it empty. Her shoulders slumped. “If I can find them, that is.”

Dedication

To Preacher's Kids around the world, three of which are incredibly close to my heart.

"When I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also." 2 Timothy 1:5 (NKJV)

Chapter 1

"My ideal wife will love children and give me a wide berth—and the wider, the better."
Agent Ace Caldwell – Railroad Detective

"Tell me again, Hiram, why my kids spent the night in a jail cell?" Thirty-year-old, Ace Caldwell posted both hands on his hips and took in the scene of his children playing happily, seemingly oblivious to the fact they were behind metal bars. Eight-year-old Jack and six-year-old David took turns tossing a deck of cards into a bucket. His four-year-old daughter, Athena, squealed and clapped with every attempt.

"Because no one else will take them." His brother-in-law, Sheriff Hiram Hartman, looked up from a stack of wanted posters and met his gaze. "I'm a single man like you. What else was I supposed to do with them? Locking them in was the only way I could make sure the boys stayed put. Thank goodness, your former housekeeper dropped them off here before she hightailed it out of town."

"This is the third resignation in two months. I pay triple the going rate for housekeepers." Ace rattled the letter of resignation in the air. "What is so difficult about taking care of three children?"

"Maybe if you weren't ball and chained to your job as a railroad detective and spent more than an hour or two a week in their presence, you might find out." Hiram rubbed a hand across his unshaven face. For the first time, Ace noticed the dark circles underscoring the man's red-rimmed eyes.

"Spare me your lecture. What would you have me do, stay in town babysitting while the Holton gang is running loose? Somebody has to bring those outlaws to justice." Ace pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'll send a telegram to the agency and see if they can send a replacement soon."

"Maybe it's time to consider another agency."

"If you have one to recommend, tell me. Several of the companies I've utilized in the past don't respond to my inquiries anymore for some reason."

"Forget the housekeeper. You need a wife." Hiram opened a drawer and removed a notepad. "There is an agency in Chicago with an excellent reputation. But Heaven help the poor woman who responds to an ad from you."

"A wife? No, thank you. I have enough to worry trouble and learned my lesson the first time," he snarled.

"Trouble in the form of three wonderful kids left at my door because you are never home." The sheriff's armchair squeaked as he rolled back and searched through his desk drawer. "The matchmaking

agency requires you to complete a questionnaire which includes details about what you're looking for in a woman. Then, based on the information provided, the matchmaker will pick a bride who will suit your needs. I started my list already." Hiram flipped open his notepad. "My request is for a young woman under the age of thirty and a good cook who is pleasant and easy on the eyes."

Ace shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. For a moment, he could almost feel the presence of his late wife. The rustling of her skirts, the scent of roses, then the shrillness of her voice demanding a life he couldn't provide. He shuddered. "If my marriage with Lottie taught me anything, it's that the pretty ones are more trouble than they're worth. You will do better to ask for a spinster who is grateful for the opportunity to marry. If she doesn't have anywhere else to go, she won't be too picky."

The sheriff chuckled, and his dark eyes crinkled at the corners. "Be sure and put that on *your* application. A desperate spinster looking for an opportunity to have her own home might be your kids' only hope. The Lord knows I've tried to help and failed."

"You are the best friend a man could have. Unfortunately, all of this is my fault. I'm as terrible a father as I was a husband."

"That's ridiculous. There is plenty of blame to go around in the failure of your marriage." Hiram rose and perched on the side of his desk. "Ace, we've been friends a long time, and I care what happens to you and the children. But if you don't get a handle on your kids soon, I hate to think about what will happen. Jack is expelled from school for his behavior, and whatever he does, David will soon follow. A case in point, while my back was turned at the mercantile yesterday, he stole a handful of cigars."

"Cigars?" Ace straightened, then called over his shoulder. "Jack, David, get over here now."

Jack tossed the remaining cards toward the bucket sending them flying across the room and causing their sister to burst into giggles. "My oldest is too big for his britches and thinks he's tougher than four aces and a king." David padded across the plank floor, pausing in front of him. His oldest avoided his gaze, then bent over retrieving the cards.

"Now, Jack," Ace scowled.

The older joined while the younger stood in front of the sheriff's desk. Rays of sunlight from the window shone on their hair, highlighting auburn strands inherited from their mother. Their hazel eyes fringed by dark eyelashes mirrored his own.

He took in a deep breath. "Do you boys have anything to say?"

His middle child, David, drew a circle with his boot. "If you're asking if we locked the teacher in the outhouse, we didn't mean any

harm. It was all in fun."

He coughed to cover the unexpected chuckle that erupted from his chest, then narrowed his eyebrows. "Did you lock the housekeeper behind closed doors as well?"

"Yes, sir, but if that's all it took, she would have left the first day." David's freckled face puckered. "She was less than pleased about Jack being sent home from school and underfoot all day. But she didn't commence packing until Athena cut the fringe and flowers off her fancy hat."

Hiram leaned closer and placed his hand on Ace's back, speaking in low tones. "Thea's obsession with scissors beats all I've seen. I locked my pair in my desk drawer, and she managed to retrieve them and cut holes in all the linens in the jailhouse."

His oldest son shoved his hands in the pockets of his overalls. "The best we can figure is she's trying to make something. But whatever it is, our sister sure is determined. Thea sure is something, isn't she, Pa?"

Ace felt unexpected moisture fill his eyes. He encircled both sons in a bear hug. "All three of you are a whole lot better than something. I may not say it often enough, but I love you. No matter how badly you muck up, I'll always be glad you're mine."

"Pa!" David's small hand pushed against his chest. "I can't breathe."

"Sorry, kid." *I can't even hug my kids without making a muddle of things. The sooner I have a new housekeeper in place, the better.* Ace placed a hand on each of the boys' shoulders. 'Even though your behavior disappoints me, I'm proud you told the truth. Going forward, I expect both of you to learn from your mistakes and make good choices. The best way to do that is to accept the consequences of your actions." He tried a different approach. "Now tell me about your visit to the mercantile." Ace removed a cigar from the patch pocket of Jack's overalls. "I enjoy a good smoke. But I'm man enough to purchase my cigars and certainly wouldn't take something that doesn't belong to me."

"Stealing is downright unneighborly." Jack shoved his fists into his pockets.

"Since we agree, tell me what punishment is appropriate for the owner of these overalls?"

Jack gave a sideways glance toward his brother. "Seeing as it's his first offense, maybe just a swat or two on his backside?"

"What justice is there for the store owner?"

"Maybe the kid could earn money to pay the man back? He could sweep out the store or maybe clear out the stalls at the livery?" David flashed a snaggle-tooth grin.

“Excellent notion, and I believe an apology would be in order too.”

“Yes, sir, it would probably make the kid think twice before he did something like that again.” Jack rocked on his heels. “Makes me mighty grateful these aren’t my pants.”

Chapter 2

"Two are better than one because they can support and encourage one another."
- Miss Mercy Marigold Fairchild – Piano Teacher

The worn boots of twenty-two-year-old Mercy Fairchild shuffled across the plush carpeted floor in rich magenta as she glanced around her solicitor's office. Her eyes lingered on the mahogany-paneled walls and velvet drapes, a stark contrast to her father's office at the church. "His *former* office," Mercy voiced her thoughts out loud. "Why didn't I send for the doctor sooner?"

She leaned back against the leather upholstered chair and twisted her handkerchief in her lap. *Because Father told me not to spend the money, and I am an unquestioning, dutiful, respectful, and amenable pastor's daughter*. The door creaked, and her father's friend and attorney, Wendall Knowles, appeared wearing light-colored pants with a dark frock coat and a low-cut, patterned vest.

"Good morning, my dear. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

The attorney's dark hair streaked in silver was slicked down, and a wide necktie sat loose low on the neck, causing his perfectly squared bow tie to be off-center. He cleared his throat. "I'm afraid the news is worse than we anticipated."

"How could it be worse? My father is dead. My sisters and I are living in a small room in a boardinghouse with no job and no prospects." Mercy blew out her cheeks.

"That's the first time I've ever heard you express anything but dutiful acceptance." Mr. Knowles' mouth twitched. "Past time for you to voice some disappointment, in my opinion. However, I can understand why you might not want to do so in front of your sisters. Your father left you in charge of his affairs, not because you are the oldest but because you are faithful and steadfast."

He propped his glasses on the tip of his nose and retrieved a file from his desk. "Your father has very little debt, so I was hoping after settling his accounts, there would be enough to allow you girls more time to consider additional opportunities other than the one that is put before us now."

Mercy twisted her reticule in her lap. "I'm thankful there is enough to settle his accounts. After paying the boardinghouse in advance for three months, I have exactly twelve dollars and fifteen cents left from the household account, money saved selling eggs and butter. That's all there is, isn't it?"

"Your father's salary was nominal at best. I don't know how he was able to save anything at all. Only a few dollars remain." The

attorney tapped his pencil on the palm of his hand and stared into the distance. “When your father received his diagnosis last year, he was beside himself with worry. He knew your home would be turned over to the new pastor, leaving you and your sisters in a vulnerable state.” He rose from his chair and perched on the side of the desk. “Even years later, the effects of the war on this town have been devastating, with little or no opportunity for employment. Marriage would be the ideal solution if there were any single men in the area that your father would allow within twenty feet of you and your sisters.”

“It certainly put his mind at ease when you located the matchmaker in Chicago.” Mercy’s lips curved upward. “I was surprised to see his reaction. He was almost jubilant and declared the service an answer to prayer. Moreover, he made me promise to accept their recommendations for me and my sisters.”

“The matchmaker’s reputation is excellent.” Lines appeared along the solicitor’s mouth. “I just wish there were another way.”

“The survey we completed was certainly thorough.” Mercy blinked rapidly. “Father was supportive of my request to marry a pastor or a missionary out west. His eyes would brighten just at the prospect. But, on the other hand, he was less enthused about Grace’s request to marry a businessman looking for a wife who could run his household and entertain.”

Mr. Knowles chuckled. “Yes, well, I think her request is understandable. Grace is much like my own daughter. I can’t imagine either of them thriving out west in a remote location. Who would they find to discuss the latest fashions over tea with?”

“Even so, I admit to hoping for a bit of luxury myself.” Mercy bit her lips to disguise a grin. “My desire is to go where God leads, but I find myself repeating the same prayer over and over. Please God, let there be a piano.”

Clouds of steam and fire shot up from the engine and rolled past her window. Squeaks and groans from hundreds of moving parts began to churn, and the train slowly pulled from the station. Mercy placed her hand along her stomach, trying to calm the kaleidoscope of butterflies erupting against her corset. Over the past week, she said goodbye to the scenic background of trees and valleys of Georgia. Spring scenes of emerging green grass and flowering trees transitioned to flat terrain with each click-clack of the locomotive wheels. The dusty landscape appeared barren against the blue sky, mimicking the feeling of homesickness, loneliness, and despair within her.

Mercy shook her head to clear her melancholy mood. *How silly to let the unwelcoming landscape cause me to lose heart*. She removed a

letter from her reticule and ran her finger along the information from the agency.

Dear Miss Fairchild,

Based on our agency's recommendation, we are pleased to confirm your match to Mr. Horace Caldwell of Trickling Springs, Texas.

Mercy's eyebrows furrowed. Not for the first time she wondered about the salutation. I wonder why it says Mr. instead of Reverend or Pastor? Perhaps he has not received his ordination yet. *If he needs help studying for his examination, I can help. I'm so thankful Father insisted we complete a classical education including Biblical study and Greek.*

She closed her eyes and let her imagination wander to thoughts of a young man, his hair ruffled and tie askew, studying amongst scattered papers across his rolltop desk. The poor man probably hadn't had a decent meal in weeks.

A soft snore from her traveling companion interrupted her thoughts. Mercy's lips twitched. The woman's enormous hat embellished with silk flowers rested at an odd angle, partially concealing her face. Her rhythmic breathing created movement in the feather accents as though beckoning for a compliment.

Mercy adjusted her straw bonnet unnecessarily, then smoothed her skirt, now caked in railroad soot. Her wish for a new hat and dress to marry in was unrequited. Fortunately, with the ladies auxiliary group's help, her sisters now each owned a new Sunday best. Dust concealed the hours of work and skill provided to refashion her traveling suit. She blinked back unexpected tears. Grace's comment that she wouldn't be expected to dress in the latest fashion stung slightly. Was there some unwritten rule that a pastor's wife couldn't enjoy pretty things? Sighing, she turned her attention back to the letter.

Our agency prides itself in matching individual likes, dislikes, and desires, uniting couples in marital harmony. Therefore, we feel confident that your match will be harmonious.

Mercy's mouth lifted. Her sisters teased her regarding her lengthy response to the questionnaire. But she wanted to clarify her desire to utilize the skills she'd acquired running her father's home and assisting him with pastoral duties since her mother's illness and then death. *Lord, please let there be a piano*.

She returned her gaze out the window toward the fleeting landscape. The setting sun glowed orange, warming her heart. *In a few weeks, the evidence of spring will arrive. Grace and Faith will happily settle in their own homes. My new husband and I will be well on our way to building a marital partnership. I will do my best to be the helpmate he needs, and he will be the godly husband that I prayed for. And we will be happy*.

Chapter 3

"*Life is like a game of poker. When fate deals you the wrong cards, play the ones you get to their greatest potential.*"
- Agent Ace Caldwell – Railroad Detective

The engineer activated two long whistles with the pull cord, and clouds of steam and fire shot up from the engine as it began its departure from the station. The windows in the telegraph office rattled, and Ace experienced the illusory motion of riding on the train away from his problems at home toward the mission consuming his thoughts.

Heavy work boots plodded across the wooden boardwalk, combined with the booming voice of his brother-in-law, Hiram. "Don't even think about leaving town yet." The reflection of the sheriff's tin star flashed in the morning sun. His hands rested on a double-looped holster on his hips.

"I'm familiar with the term *shotgun wedding*. I suppose a six-shooter will work as an appropriate incentive as well." Ace adjusted his sleeping daughter to his right shoulder. "Where are the boys?"

"They're still mucking out stalls at the livery. Amos is keeping a steady eye on them. I told him you would be by to pick them up before the wedding."

"I'd rather take a beating than marry again. But if that is what it takes to make sure the kids are cared for, I'll do my duty. But if the woman gets off the train looking like she's been chewing barbed wire, I'm sending her back."

"How about if she's warm in the winter and shady in the summer?" Hiram's blue-gray eyes crinkled at the corners. "Or thin as a fiddle string?"

"Looks don't matter. The plainer, the better, in my opinion. I asked for a down-on-her-luck spinster who will be happy raising someone else's children and won't mind an absentee husband." Ace nodded, peering down onto the empty track. "As long as she has a pleasant demeanor, we're headed over to the church. With any luck, I'll have her settled in time for me to be on the four o'clock train this afternoon."

"You don't mean it." Hiram whistled. "You're going to turn tail and run?"

"I'm not running. I have a job to do. The sooner the Holton gang is behind bars, the better it will be for all of us." Ace reached into his pocket, pulled out the wire he'd received this morning, and passed it to the sheriff. "This group of outlaws is ruthless. The railroad is putting more men on the job. I need to be there to help with the

selection process."

Ace placed a kiss on top of his daughter's head and closed his eyes. *Lord, I sure could use a hand down here. Please let this woman be kind to my children.*

Hiram's lips moved as he read the telegram. His mouth formed into a thin line. "The matchmaker is known to fulfill her duties with excellence. Whoever your bride is will be grateful for a home and children to love. Maybe she'll be the type who doesn't want a husband underfoot."

"That will suit me perfectly. I'll be back in town next week, spend the night, and be off again. My schedule will remain the same until this job is over." The shrill sound of the train's whistle rang out, and Ace inclined his chin toward clouds of smoke emitting from the approaching train. "I depend on you to keep an eye on things. Send me a telegram if there's any sign of trouble."

"Sure, if she's a good cook, do you mind if I stay for supper?" Hiram rubbed his stomach. "I'm a terrible cook, and the diner's fare is not much better."

"Of course not." Ace's brow furrowed as he watched several passengers disembark.

"What did you say her name is?"

"Mercy Fairchild." Ace's lips formed a grim line. "If that name doesn't bring to mind an old-maid schoolteacher, I don't know what does."

"If she is a teacher, the skill will come in handy, especially with Jack and David. I imagine she will have the experience to shape the boys up in no time. Who knows? They might commence to learning once they realize there's no escaping their schooling."

The conductor extended his hand and assisted a beautiful young woman with a large satchel. A gust of April wind blew with a vengeance, encircling her slender figure in a whirlwind. It caught her straw bonnet in its gale, causing locks of hair to escape from her pins.

"Goodness gracious, I never saw such a wind," she cried in a slow, Southern drawl.

His mouth twitched, whether from the exaggerated lilt to her vowels, or the swiftness of several men attempting to assist. "Just what this town needs, a Southern belle traveling by herself." Ace nodded toward the locals circling her hat as though they were a team roping a steer. "Those cowpokes are already surrounding her like a vulture. Blond hair, nice figure—if someone doesn't show up quick to pick her up, you're going to have your hands full protecting her."

"The fellow in the blue shirt is the Bowen's ranch foreman. I heard Bo ordered him a mail-order bride. But, of course, he wouldn't send someone else to do an important job like that for him." Hiram rubbed

his chin. “There is no other woman on the platform. Could be your plain little spinster is here somewhere.”

Ace gulped and stared at the young woman struggling to control her skirts. Her golden hair spilled across her shoulders down to her waist, blowing with the wind reminding him of a real-life Aphrodite. “Goddess of love and marriage, good luck to the poor man who marries her.”

The sheriff’s deep chuckle caused him to tear his gaze away from the scene. A slow grin spread across the sheriff’s face. “No, it can’t be! You look more akin to a spinster than she does.”

“Not but one way to find out.” Hiram waggled his eyebrows, then made his way over to the group.

Ace took in a deep breath. His boots seemed heavy, as though someone bolted them to the train’s platform. “Why would the agency send someone like her? She is young and beautiful,” he muttered.

“Welcome to Trickling Springs, Texas, Miss. I’m Sheriff Hartman. May I escort you somewhere?” His friend lifted his hat.

“How nice to meet you, Sheriff. Thank you for your assistance. I am here to meet my fiancé, Horace Caldwell. Perhaps he has been detained. Can you direct me to him?” She smiled, displaying twin dimples framing full lips, causing Ace’s heart to pound against his chest.

“Horace Caldwell?” Hiram grinned and offered her his arm. “As a matter of fact, Horace is here looking for you. He’ll be relieved to find you arrived safe and sound.”

“Who is Horace Caldwell?” one of the cowboys scowled.

The woman’s lips curved upward, and her voice was soft and slow. “Thank y’all for assisting me.”

“Happy to help.” one of the dusty cowboys placed the battered bonnet in her hand. “Sorry about your hat.”

“Thank you for retrieving it for me. Perhaps we will meet again this Sunday in church?”

The cowpoke placed his hat over his heart and grinned. “Yes, ma’am, I look forward to it.”

Ace muttered, “What is she doing inviting a stranger anywhere? If any of those men showed up in church, the roof would cave in.” Shaking his head, he adjusted Thea on his hip, then inched forward. *This is either somebody’s idea of a joke or a terrible mistake. I’ll get to the bottom of it, then send her to the poor man about to tie himself to a woman who doesn’t have the sense not to talk to strangers.*

The sheriff motioned with his thumb and broke into a grin. “Miss Fairchild’s fiancé and her new stepdaughter have arrived, men. Step aside so he can greet her properly.”

Three pairs of eyes met his. The foreman’s jaw twitched. “You’re a

fortunate man." He spun on his heel, then tipped his hat toward the woman. "It's not every day a beautiful young lady steps off the train. Don't be in too big of a hurry to tie yourself to a man who isn't as attentive as you deserve. This town is full of men ready to seize the opportunity to meet someone like you."

The woman's cheeks pinkened, then her head dipped. His stomach tightened, and he fought the urge not to introduce the cowpoke to his fist. Instead, patting his daughter's back, he spoke softly in her ear. "Life is like a game of poker. When fate deals you the wrong cards, play the ones you get to their greatest potential. Wake up and meet your new Mama, Thea."

Chapter 4

"Peace comes when you're walking with God and trusting Him.
If only I could convince my knocking knees of the fact."
– Miss Mercy Marigold Fairchild

"Much obliged, men. I'll take it from here." A tall, broad-shouldered man stepped forward carrying a small girl. He raised his Stetson, displaying hair the color of the midnight sky combed away from his face.

His brow furrowed. "Miss Fairchild?"

Mercy's heart flip-flopped at the sound of the man's deep voice. He wore tailored trousers and a sack coat buttoned only at the top, showing his patterned vest and watch chain to their best advantage. A six-shooter was tucked into a double-looped holster over his right hip. Her eyebrows narrowed. *How odd. I have never known a member of clergy to wear anything particularly flashy or stylish, nor carry a gun*. The reflective light from his brown eyes took on a golden color, reminding her of a cat staring at a bowl of cream.

"Yes, are you Mr. Caldwell?"

"Guilty as charged." His gaze darted from the top of her head to the tips of her boots, then returned to lingered on her lips. Mercy felt heat rise from her neck to the roots of her hair. "You're a lot younger and prettier than I expected. This is my daughter, Athena. She just turned four."

"What a beautiful child." Mercy stepped closer and smiled. "Good morning, Athena. I suppose your father's study of the Greek language inspired your name."

"Not hardly," a deep rumbling emitted from his chest. "The queen of spades' nickname is Athena. Next to the king of spades, she's the most powerful in the deck."

Mercy's hand flew to her throat, and she sucked in a deep breath. Her intended smiled broadly and winked. "Oh my, what an interesting sense of humor you have, Mr. Caldwell. I almost believed you for a moment." She placed her hand on his sleeve and spoke softly, "The agency didn't mention your daughter."

"They didn't?" Athena's green eyes flecked with gold met hers, and her lips curved upward slightly before she tightened the hold around her father's neck and hid her face.

"Well now, you know. Thea is shy around strangers. She didn't sleep well last night, and that's not helping matters." He nodded toward her satchel. "Do you have more luggage?"

"Yes, one trunk." Huffs of steam and the chug of the engine temporarily impeded further discussion. Mr. Caldwell offered his free

arm and steered her toward a man placing freight onto a cart.

He tilted his chin toward the bank, livery stable, and mercantile. “With the expansion of the railroad, the town is busting at the seams with settlers and new businesses. The grist mill owner and I are in partnership and recently expanded and opened a lumber mill.” Another burst of strong wind sent dozens of tumbleweeds bouncing along the dusty street and along the boardwalk.

A glint from the metal roof of the church caught her eye. Mercy twisted her hair into a bun under her battered hat and secured it by tying a bow. “I can’t imagine where you find the time to partner in a business. You must never sleep.” Her cheeks flamed under her intended’s raised eyebrow.

“Reverend Michael is scheduled to go out of town but delayed his travels so he could perform the ceremony. I thought it best, under the circumstances, for us to take him up on his offer to marry this morning.”

“Oh, I see. I didn’t realize we would marry today. Thought we might take some time to get to know each other first?” Mercy gulped.

He glanced toward the hotel, then cleared his throat. “Sorry, but I can’t afford the luxury of delaying matters.”

Mercy followed his gaze and bit her lip. Staying at the hotel would be costly. *What was I thinking suggesting he bear another expense*? “All right, Mr. Caldwell. My father made me promise to trust the agency’s recommendation. One of the last things he said to me was, ‘God often does great things in absurd ways.’ I came here to marry you and suppose a few more days won’t change my opinion on things.” She grasped her skirts again as another burst of wind blew, rustling her skirts. Locks of hair dislodged from her bonnet. Mercy abandoned her hair to the gale. “Although I don’t think I will make much of a bride in this outfit with my hair in disarray. I must look an absolute mess.”

His eyes darkened to a rich shade of toffee. “Miss Fairchild, I can’t imagine you looking more beautiful than you do now. But certain restraints must take precedence over preference.” He removed his watch and glanced at the time.

Her shoulders slumped. Taking a deep breath, she hitched them up again and forced a smile. “As a pastor’s daughter, I understand the pressures and restraints placed on the clergy. It will be inconsiderate of me to delay his trip.” Mercy gave him a sideways glance. “If you can bear to marry a dusty bride who is more than a bit travel-worn, I’m willing.”

“You’re a pastor’s daughter?”

“Yes, I suppose my background is one of the reasons the agency thought we would be a good match. My mother became ill when I was

ten and passed away more than five years ago. It was necessary for me to take on her duties at church, the household, and help my father raise my sisters."

His mouth curved into half a smile. "Responsibilities of the household I understand, but I'm not familiar with duties required of a pastor's spouse. Although Reverend Michael's wife stays pretty busy pointing her finger and wagging her tongue."

"What a terrible testimony." Mercy bit her lip and studied the crinkling around the corner of her fiancé's eyes. Goodness, the man's teasing manner would take some getting used to. "My mother played the piano, helped care for the needy and sick, and was an extension of my father's ministry. My wish is to be able to do the same for you."

"Taking care of the household and my children will uphold any expectation I may have. I certainly have no wish to involve you in any dealings related to my work. You're a beautiful woman with an air of innocence about you. Unfortunately, the villains I work with will view you as an easy pawn."

"Your mission field is ripe for the picking then?"

"Mission field? I guess you could call it that." He rubbed his chin. "It's a crop ripe with scoundrels."

"Another grim testimonial if ever I heard one." Mercy squared her shoulders. "Even good ground must be plowed and prepared. Perhaps after you toil the soil, there will be room for me to help."

"Toil the soil?" Mr. Caldwell shook his head. "We seem to be conversing about two different things. I'm not a farmer, Miss."

"Your teasing manner is diverting." Mercy's lips twitched. "Of course, you realize I'm referring to God's Word as the seed and our hearts the soil."

"I see…well actually, I don't." He readjusted his daughter on his hip, then pushed his hat toward the back of his head. "Suppose I'm a bit out of practice. My work with the railroad keeps me busy, and it's rare I get back in town for the service."

"There must be some mistake. You work for the railroad? I specifically asked to marry a pastor or missionary." Mercy gulped.

He flinched. "I asked for someone who would be kind to my family. I figured you would be a down-on-her-luck spinster who wouldn't mind raising someone else's children."

Mercy stared at her boots. "It's true I am in reduced circumstances, but you think the agency would have mentioned your children. You have more than one?"

"Yes, ma'am, two boys, and a girl. David named for the king of spades and Jack, after my favorite game. Thea is the youngest." His brow furrowed, then released. "Don't you like children? "

"Yes, of course, I love children." She folded her arms over her

stomach. “When I was a little girl, I dreamed I would have a houseful.”

His face brightened, and he gave her hand a slight squeeze. “Maybe that’s why the matchmaker paired us up? Believe me when I say if kids are part of your dream, you just hit the jackpot.”

Chapter 5

"Fate plays its cards in a way that no one can understand."
– Agent Ace Caldwell – Railroad Detective

Standing on the verandah of the pastor's front porch, Ace returned his watch to his vest pocket and scowled. "I should have my head examined for listening to you in the first place."

"Appears to me you've been dealt a winning hand. What's there to complain about?"

Cheers and laughter interrupted the conversation. Ace followed Hiram's gaze toward his sons playing kick the can with the pastor's children. "Miss Fairchild didn't even raise an eyebrow when the boys showed up smelling like horse dung. She's obviously showing signs of shock and is simply going through the motions."

"If that were the case, she wouldn't have asked to speak to the pastor, and you would already be married."

"I wonder what she's talking to him about?"

"What's the matter? You afraid Pastor Michael is going to help her run for the hills?"

"No, of course not. The preacher wrote a letter of recommendation to the agency on my behalf, didn't he?"

"Just about everyone in town wrote a recommendation. Half of them are almost as desperate as I am to get you some help with your kids."

"Very funny."

"Wasn't joking." Hiram pulled on his ear. "Maybe if she changes her mind about you, she might consider me. That would be like feeding two dogs with one biscuit. The beauty of the union will be—I get a beautiful wife who might not mind helping out with babysitting until your spinster bride arrives."

Ace rubbed his chest and scowled as a surge of protection swelled in his heart. "I ought to punch you in the mouth for making that comment."

"How come? Here I am putting your needs in line with mine." Hiram grinned and shook Ace's shoulder playfully.

"After seeing the way Thea took to her, the woman's holding a winning hand."

"She sure does seem to like her. But I'm concerned your scissor-happy daughter is just biding her time, waiting for the opportunity to cut the fringe off the woman's purse." Hiram's shoulders shook with laughter.

"Her hands are so tiny. I don't know how in the world she manages to cut anything." Ace shrugged. "Even so, if she does destroy

anything, I'll buy the woman a new purse and an entire wardrobe to match."

A muscle in Hiram's jaw twitched. "There is no question you'll be a good provider. But if all you truly want is a housekeeper who won't run at the first sign of trouble, in fairness to Miss Fairchild, call the wedding off now. She will make some man a mighty fine wife."

"It certainly is an agreeable twist of fate." Ace felt a fluttering in his chest, then immediately scowled at the sensation. "Maybe the reason this agency has a stellar reputation is because they recognize the needs of the applicants better than they do themselves."

The sheriff pulled on his ear. "It's clear from the shape of her boots she's in dire circumstances. Even so, it seems unfair to confine her role to hired help."

"Based on my history, it's doubtful I can be the husband she deserves. But if she agrees to this marriage, I will make sure she never wants for anything. In my experience, that's all women truly desire anyway."

As she stood in the pastor's front parlor listening to Reverend Michael's voice charging her to love, honor, and obey her spouse, Mercy's knees knocked. The pastor's wife's skills in decorating the modest parsonage were evident and a complete contrast from the place she called home. The floral wallpapered walls and ruffled curtains would rival a room featured in *Godey's Magazine*.

The pastor flipped through the pages of his Bible, and for a moment, Mercy wondered which verse her father would share in this situation. Her gaze wandered to Thea, who looked adorable sitting on the overstuffed settee, clutching her reticule like a doll and smoothing the fringe through her tiny fingers. *I understand what it's like to be without a mother but can't imagine what it would be like for a child that age. At least someone seems happy about my arrival.*

The willowy form of the trio of daffodils presented to her by the pastor's children wavered with her quaking resolve. The sweet scent did little to disguise the pungent aroma coming from her soon-to-be stepsons. Judging from the state of their overalls, they must have rolled around in the muck at the livery before arriving. The scowls on their faces matched Mrs. Michael's, who covered her nose and mouth with a dainty handkerchief. *I don't blame the woman for insisting the boys not sit on the parlor furniture. It's a wonder she didn't ask them to wait outside.*

Shuffling her feet, she glanced over her shoulder toward the front door and fought the desire to run. *I wonder how long the three dollars left in my purse will last.*

The pastor cleared his throat. His eyebrows rose. “Mercy… do you promise?”

Her mouth opened, then closed, and she blinked rapidly. Her fiancé’s arm encircled her waist, and he whispered in her ear. “Are you feeling all right? You’re not about to faint on me, are you?”

She met his gaze and was surprised to receive an encouraging wink. Moderate in height with broad shoulders and a narrow waist, he was about six inches taller than her five feet two inches, her petite frame an intimidating contrast to the man. He was obviously an accomplished flirt. What was the agency thinking?

Lifting her chin, she nodded. *I must believe my father is right and have faith that this new life is what God wants*. “I do.”

The pastor took his handkerchief and wiped his brow. “Well, good then. You had me worried.”

“Me too,” her future husband bent closer and spoke softly. He reached for her hand circling her palm with the rough pad of his thumb. She gulped. His nearness did funny things to her stomach.

“The Lord knows that not one of us is complete in ourselves. He has been sanctioning marriages since Adam and Eve.” The pastor’s voice interrupted her thoughts, “Since you already joined hands, let’s proceed with the symbol of your union, the ring.”

She felt her husband stiffen, and a flush crept across his face. He offered her a sheepish grin, then removed a gold ring with a square garnet center stone from his pinky.

“Now place the ring on Mercy’s finger and repeat after me: ‘I, Horace take you, Mercy, to be my wedded wife—To have and to hold from this day forward. For better, for worse. For richer, for poorer. In sickness and in health. To love and cherish ‘til death do us part, according to God’s holy ordinance. And with this ring, I pledge you my love.’”

As he slipped the ring on her finger, Mercy took in a deep breath, surprised at the unexpected comfort from the warmth of his hands cradling hers.

The pastor thumped his Bible. “The making of a good marriage involves seeking divine guidance. My belief is God is the matchmaker in all of this, and it is my joy and personal privilege to declare you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Standing toe to toe, Mercy glanced at her husband’s lips and watched with fascination at the bob of his Adam’s apple. “Are you going to kiss her, Pa?” The youngest son gave a snaggle-tooth grin.

“Yuk.” the oldest son Jack scowled. “Don’t do it, Pa, then you’ll be stuck with her for life.”

“It’s too late for that warning, Jack. You are all ‘stuck’ with each other. Best make the most of it.” The sheriff placed both hands on the

boy's shoulder.

Her new husband cupped her cheeks in his palms, then leaned closer. His breath teased her lips. The green and golden flecks in his eyes darkened, making his eyes appear the color of toffee. Finally, their lips met, sending a spark of electricity along her spine.

Chapter 6

"I look forward to being a vital part of my husband's work. My ideal husband will welcome me as his partner in life."
– Miss Mercy Marigold Fairchild – Piano Teacher

The buggy wheels bounced as Ace traveled with his family away from town. He was grateful for the physical separation his daughter presented, sitting between him and his new bride. *I should never have kissed her.* The physical attraction was a pull he couldn't afford to give in to if he wanted to maintain control of the situation.

"It's as though heaven opened up, sending rays of light illuminating the green stems and purple blooms. What are the flowers waving in the wind called?" His mouth twitched at the slow drawl to his new bride's voice as she exclaimed over the beauty of the diverse terrain of the hills and low-lying creek bottoms blazing with wildflowers.

"Bluebonnets. In another few weeks, this entire field will be full of blooms and their sweet aroma."

"Aw, come on, Pa. Now that you are married, are we going to have to talk about flowers and smells?" Jack huffed.

"I'm trying to take our minds off the aromas coming from you two in the back seat." Ace scowled. "Which one of you is going to tell me why you arrived at the pastor's house covered in muck?"

"David pushed me."

"I did not. How come you always blame me for everything?" David elbowed his brother in the stomach. "Jack fell over his own two feet, and when I laughed, he pounced on me."

"Did not." Jack punched his brother in the shoulder.

"Boys, enough, we'll talk about this when we're back at the house." Ace's gaze returned to his new wife, noting the pallor of her face. He wished he could make her smile, and that surprised him.

"The house is just over a mile to town and an easy distance with a horse and buggy. The boys take the shortcut to school and cut across the property where the mill is located. If you don't need the buggy, it's about a fifteen-minute walk."

Ace motioned toward a clump of massive oak trees and white flowering yucca plants clinging to large boulders. "That's where the Bowen's land ends, and ours begins. Bo raises cattle and is a good man. I'm leasing my property to him since he needs the water coming from my spring. It helps us both since I don't have time to care for stock myself. So, if there's ever an emergency, send one of the boys his

way. Hiram is going to be checking in on you daily as well."

"How often do you travel?" Mercy met his gaze. Her blue eyes were bright, reminding him of the flowers in the field.

He shrugged. "More often than not, I've been working for months on a case that requires my attention. Once the situation resolves, things will ease again, at least until the next crisis. My apologies for leaving so soon. I can't help the situation."

"When you mentioned that you couldn't afford to delay the wedding, I assumed the concern was the price of a hotel. But you were referring to the need for me to be in place to take care of the children before you leave this afternoon, weren't you?"

"The only reason I sent for a bride is that I need a housekeeper and a nanny to ensure my children have the proper care." His eyebrows narrowed at her slight gasp and tremble of her lips. "Surely the agency told you my requirement, so there's no point in turning on the tears. You'll find they won't work on me."

Mercy's eyes narrowed, and she wagged a finger. "First of all, the agency told me no such thing. Secondly, I am not crying. Thirdly, even the hired help is due enough respect not to be dumped like a package with three children in a home she knows nothing about."

"I'm not dumping you at some soddy surrounded by wolves. I just had the house built. You'll have your own room and a well-stocked kitchen with a new stove and running water."

"Uh oh, Pa. You'd best go ahead and turn around. She's not staying. I can tell by how red her face is." Jack's face appeared next to his shoulder.

Thea slammed her head against the buggy seat, kicking her legs and wailing. "No, don't go."

"Sit down, Jack." Ace leaned closer to his daughter. "Thea, honey, don't listen to your brother. There is no need to cry."

"Promise?" His daughter sniffed and stroked the fringe on his new wife's reticule. "I want Mercy to stay." His heart softened when his new bride wrapped her arm around Thea and smoothed her hair.

"I know you do, and that's why all three of you need to make her feel welcome." Ace shot his sons a glare. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Sure, Pa." David gave a mischievous grin displaying two missing teeth. "But you're the one who made her mad. I've been sitting here minding my own business."

Ace took in a deep breath and clucked at the horses to guide them around a large rut in the trail. The sound of their hooves pounded on the hard clay path as they rode in silence for the next few minutes. He leaned toward Mercy, speaking softly, "It is an understatement to say the agency misconstrued our requirements. Even so, we're married now, and I'd like for us to exist amicably."

Mercy met his gaze, and his gut wrenched at the sight of his bride's pale face. The afternoon sun highlighted the dark shadows under her eyes. *Don't let your guard down. She's playing on your sympathies*. "In my business, travel is part of the game. It's not feasible for me to postpone my trip."

Mercy averted her gaze, staring into the distance. He cleared his throat. "What exactly did the agency tell you about me?"

"Not much, just your name and information about my travel arrangements. My father was insistent that I could trust Mrs. Sinclair's judgment. In my mind, there was never a doubt I would marry a pastor or a missionary in one of the new territories who wanted a wife and helpmate."

"Count your blessings then. You wouldn't last ten minutes in that rowdy territory." Ace slapped his thigh and laughed.

"How do you know what I will survive or not?" Mercy's nostrils flared.

"Well to start with, you're not as big as a bar of soap. When I saw you get off the train, I thought that big gust of wind was going to blow you all the way back to Georgia."

"I'm a lot tougher than my bonnet." Her full lips pressed into a thin line.

Ace nodded toward the misshaped straw hat resting in her lap. "I'll say this. You sure know how to make an entrance. Every man on the train platform is half in love with you already."

"That's ridiculous." Mercy shook her head slightly.

"One thing I've learned over the years is how to read a man's face. His actions speak even louder. Why do you think they were running around like chickens chasing your hat?"

"They were simply using good manners and offering help to a stranger. I certainly appreciated their support. I was worried for a moment that you weren't going to show." Mercy crossed her arms. "Of course, now that I know your expectation for our relationship, it makes sense you would leave me floundering. After all, a servant shouldn't mind waiting for their employer."

Ace cleared his throat, choosing to ignore the jibe. "I'll do my best to return in three or four days. With any luck, I'll be back before word gets out that I left my bride high and dry. I wouldn't put it past the scoundrels at the train station to come calling to try to woo you away. Just be careful not to encourage them."

"Yes, I imagine it would be disappointing to lose a housekeeper in such a short period of time." Mercy tilted her chin, and her blue eyes flashed.

Jack's face appeared next to her shoulder. "Three or four days would be a new record. Our last housekeeper almost stayed a whole

week.”

Chapter 7

"My favorite color is anything in pastel, especially in soft blue, green, and floral patterns. I detest the color red."
– Miss Mercy Marigold Fairchild – Piano Teacher

"There's our barn." Thea motioned past a group of oak trees to an enormous stone structure. Rounding the curve in the road, she marveled as the one and one-half story, square frame house with a verandah on four sides and topped by a windowed cupola came into view. "What a beautiful home you have, Mr. Caldwell."

"It's your home now, too." He pulled to a stop and exited the buggy, then extended his arm. "My friends call me Ace."

"Not Horace?"

"Ace." He gave a quick nod.

"What do your housekeepers call you?" Mercy folded her arms and lifted her chin defiantly.

"David, how about taking your sister inside with you. Jack, I need you to water the horses." Thea's and David's boots made quick taps onto the stairs and along the porch, and Jack eagerly turned his attention to the horses.

"I'm going to ignore the last remark." Ace removed his hat and reached for her hand. "You're kind of sassy for a preacher's daughter. Aren't you supposed to be a peacemaker?"

Mercy studied the stubble darkening his square jaw. "Yes, to the peacemaker, but no to being a doormat." The morning sun lit a fire of amber and gold in his eyes, and the aroma of citrus engulfed her senses.

"Duly noted." Ace scooped her in his arms and tossed her gently, causing her to wrap her hands around his neck.

Mercy gasped and stared into his eyes, fascinated by the disappearance of green and golden flecks merging into brown. "I must say your behavior seems rather forward. Do you carry all your workers over the threshold?"

"Definitely not a peacemaker. You are spirited and stubborn. I thought for sure preachers' daughters were supposed to be sweet and demure."

"This unquestioning, dutiful, respectful, and amenable pastor's daughter feels the need to change her ways to adapt to my present circumstances." Mercy pressed her lips into a firm line.

"Pa, where you are taking Mercy?" Thea appeared, still clutching Mercy's reticule like a rag doll.

“I’m carrying her over the threshold, honey. That’s how men welcome their new brides when they bring them home.”

“Good thing you didn’t try that with our last housekeeper. You would have broken your back.” David swung open the front door. “Isn’t that right, Pa?”

A rumbling radiated from his chest, and Mercy gulped, surprised by the pleasure she felt in her husband’s embrace. “Welcome home, Mrs. Caldwell.” Ace set her down in a wide center hall separating the front rooms by a center staircase. Dark mahogany paneling covered the lower portion of the walls and perfectly matched the stain on the floors. Mercy’s lips parted at the sight of cream-colored wallcovering that covered the walls in a trellis pattern with swirls of leaves and red roses and bluebirds.

“The dining room is on the right, but we’re using it as a billiard room.” Ace swung the pocket door open with a click, displaying another paneled room with wallpaper. Her eyes widened at the detailed carving on the enormous table and the cushioned rail, covered in a tight-fitting cloth. The main wall held two pool cue storage racks separated by a gilded mirror.

“I’ve never seen a billiard table before.”

“The table is twelve feet long with six pockets – one in each corner and two on each side. The boys and I like to play in the evenings on the days that I’m home.”

A fluffy yellow cat meowed a greeting and circled Ace’s pant leg. “Thea is still too small, but she enjoys watching with the cat.”

“Mr. Kitty plays real good. She’s a good swatter.” Reaching for the feline, Thea stroked his back and received a loud purr of gratitude

“Let me rephrase that to say, Mr. Kitty enjoys obstructing our game. He positions himself in the corner pocket, then bats out his paw and changes the direction of any ball rolling his way.”

Mercy giggled. “We have a family dog who enjoys interfering when my sisters and I play croquet. It was such a nuisance until we decided to appoint him our official ‘rover.’ After that, I learned never to strike my ball hard until he was occupied with my opponent’s.”

“I’m surprised your pa would let you play.” Ace’s eyebrows narrowed.

“You have a lot of misconceptions about clergy and their families, it seems.” Mercy gave a saucy grin. “While there is a lot of pressure put on the families of clergy, my father never opposed our participation in playing games and enjoying ourselves.”

“‘If you like croquet, you’ll enjoy playing billiard games. I’ll teach you.” Ace stepped closer, his mouth lifted at the corners, and his dark eyes sparkling.

Mercy’s heart leaped in her throat. “I can’t imagine what the

ladies at my father's church would say, but I would enjoy learning. Thank you."

He cleared his throat. "Let me show you the parlor."

"No, let me," Thea reached for Mercy's hand and pulled her along the hallway, past the center staircase, and threw open the pocket doors with a bang. "This room has lots of pictures of a witch."

"She's not a witch." Ace pushed out his chest and waved toward the wall covered in concave medallions with roses, winding vines, tiny buds, and red, yellow, and green flowers.

Mercy stepped closer to examine the large diamond shapes containing a woman's head with snakes in place of hair. She gasped. "It's Medusa."

"I'm told a grinning face helps to ward off evil, demons, and enemies. I picked this pattern out myself."

"Oh dear, is she smiling? I'm afraid I can't get past the…uh… hairstyle."

"Yep, nothing scarier than a beautiful woman. She's bound to scare off an evil spirit or two." Ace motioned toward a cherry settee in red velvet. Four matching chairs circled a folding game table on five legs with casters. "The fellows and I play poker here on nights when I'm in town." He inclined his chin toward a whiskey barrel serving as a makeshift table and containing a checkerboard. "The boys like to play checkers."

"I don't see any books, puzzles, or toys?" Mercy circled the room, dodging several pairs of men's boots and piles of peanut shells.

"They don't need any of that stuff. Boys need fresh air and sunshine and a chance to run off some of their energy."

Thea tugged on her hand. "Let me show you my room." Mercy found herself passing through the foyer down another hallway, then entered the child's room. Lifting her skirt, she stepped over piles of laundry, then made her way toward Thea's iron bed. She ran her hand over the quilt admiring the appliqué leaves and flowers of turkey red and green. The matching curtains in a dot-patterned calico in the same colors complemented the design.

"There's a lady outside of town who does our laundry. But I haven't had time to take it by her house." Ace pulled on his collar. "It was easier to buy the children new clothes. Thea usually wears overalls like the boys."

"Although it may take me a while to catch up, I can do the laundry."

"No need, you'll have plenty to do. Besides, Mrs. Washington is a widow raising two boys on her own. She does a good job and can use the money."

Mercy nodded and made her way to the boys' room. Her heart

lifted at the exuberance in David's snaggle-tooth smile when she overlooked the messy state choosing to compliment the hunting scene on their wallpapered walls and matching drapes.

Returning toward the front of the house, the faint aroma of cigar smoke drew her attention toward an open doorway. An elegant but unmade four-poster bed centered the room. A double-door wardrobe, dressing table with mirror, lined additional walls, and an overstuffed chair created a resting spot in front of the stone fireplace.

"After the last fiasco with our housekeeper, I converted the spare bedroom into a water closet." Ace waved his hand toward a closed door. "There's a fifty-foot lead pipe connected to a cyclic pump that carries water from a spring-fed brook close to the house. Water flows from a tank to the kitchen sink, water closet, and tub."

"The kitchen is this way." Ace pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen. The afternoon sun shone through the double window, causing a warm glow on the wooden floors. The wide aisle between the stove, sink, and work area created ample space for more than one cook and contained an open hearth. A long, plank table with bench seating stood close to the wall.

Her boots made soft taps as she circled the room, pausing at the large sink centered under a window.

She bit her lip to stifle a gasp at the disarray of pots and plates stacked on what appeared to be a new cast-iron stove. "I believe the house where I grew up could almost fit in this one room. It's lovely and enormous." Mercy swallowed to get past the lump in her throat. *Lord, you provided me a lovely home and children who need nurturing. Help me to overcome my disappointed hopes. Please deliver my sisters safely to their new homes. I pray they will be well received and cherished.*

Blinking rapidly, she forced a smile. "I'm feeling spoiled already."

Ace took her hand. "You say you want to be a helpmate to your husband. Assuredly, no man needs as much assistance as I do. Nothing would please me more if we could move forward as partners. I want you to be happy."

She felt a weight lift from her chest at the sweet sentiment. *Maybe if I apply enough effort and love to the family God provided, He will reward my effort.*

His Adam's apple jumped, and he swallowed hard. "Your room is conveniently located." Dropping her hand, he pivoted and opened a door. From the kitchen's window, rays of sun cast light on various shelves along the opposite wall containing jars of produce. Dust particles floated toward the small cot and a dresser with a washstand. Several hooks for clothes lined the clapboard walls. "I'll move a couple of crates so that you can fit your trunk in here. It will be a tight squeeze, but it should work."

Her mouth opened and closed. The man was an absolute scoundrel. One minute carrying her over the threshold and telling her he wanted a partner and the next designating her to sleep in a pantry. No wonder he couldn't keep a housekeeper.

He rocked on his boots, giving a broad smile as though pleased with himself. Then, turning his attention toward the children, he called, "David, I left the basket with the lunch I ordered from the diner in the buggy. How about you and Thea get it and bring your brother back with you? I don't know about you two, but I'm starving."

The children scurried away to find their brother. Mercy's fingernails dug into her palms. "When you said you wanted us to work together as partners, I thought maybe there was some hope for our relationship. Obviously, I was a fool to believe you."

"What are you talking about?" The muscle in his jaw twitched. "Of course, I want us to be partners."

"So you say and even committed to it this morning before God. Apparently, your vows mean nothing. I am simply the means to an end. Did you think by marrying me, you would force me to stay and become an unpaid member of your household staff?"

"Is it wrong to want to provide stability for my children?" His eyebrows narrowed. "Don't come off high and mighty with me. You must be pretty desperate to become a mail-order bride. Your needs will be met and then some. I'm sure you could have done a lot worse."

Mercy lifted her chin. "My circumstances may be dire, but that doesn't mean I would elect to choose a position of housekeeper over being a wife and mother."

"You're young and still have your head full of unrealistic dreams. Disappointment is part of life. It's better to come to terms with reality now." His voice softened. "You are my wife, and we now share three children. Seems to me you got what you asked for. There's no reason to think we can't achieve an agreeable life together."

"You don't want a wife. You want a servant." She removed the garnet ring from her third finger and placed it in the palm of his hand. "It seems odd for a maid to wear such a nice piece of jewelry. Especially one who is designated to sleep in a storage area with the produce."

Ace ran his fingers through his hair. "If you don't like your room, just say so. Once I converted the spare bedroom to a water closet, my intention was to adapt some space in the attic. When I return to town, I'll hire somebody to start working on it right away."

Mercy folded her arms and tapped her foot. "Oh, I see, how wonderful. I suppose I should be grateful you didn't designate a spot in the root cellar or the barn."

“This is a temporary solution. If it makes you feel better, tell the boys to move the produce somewhere else. Do you need more hooks for your dresses and such? I can nail a few to the wall before I leave. Or I can move the cot to Thea’s room if you would rather sleep there.”

“Do whatever you like, but understand this, Mr. Caldwell. My time here is limited. I have no intention of staying in a place where more concern is shown toward the billiard table than me. I don’t care if I have to sleep in a soddy surrounded by wolves. You’d best be on the lookout for another housekeeper because I will not be fulfilling the role.”

Chapter 8

"*If you find yourself in a hole, you'd best stop digging*."
– Agent Ace Caldwell – Railroad Detective

Standing outside the train station, Ace followed the sheriff's gaze as he scanned the crowded platform.

"Don't you always say, 'you may have to accept the cards life deals you, but the way you play is free will'? Sounds like your new wife has upped the ante." Hiram slapped his thigh and laughed.

"Very funny." Ace made a kicking motion with his boot. "You got me into this mess. Now help me."

Hiram stiffened. "No, you don't. You're not pinning this on me. You knew good and well there was some sort of mistake as soon as the woman stepped off the train, and you married her anyway."

"Bottom line, she is the one the agency sent. My hope is once she's had time to think about things, she'll see the advantages in staying. I've threatened the boys with sending for Mrs. Mixon again if they give Mercy any trouble."

"Do you want Mrs. Mixon to come back?"

"No, and I doubt she would even if I tripled her salary, but the boys don't know that."

"I still think you're going about this the wrong way. You are making Mercy pay for your first wife's mistakes. Lottie left you because she didn't want the responsibility of being a mother."

"It's hard not to blame myself." Ace let out a ragged breath. "But you're right. She missed the excitement of traveling on the riverboat and receiving the attention and flattery of other men. The children and I were never enough."

"Judging your new bride based on Lottie's actions is flat-out wrong. She's a sweet little thing. Give her a chance."

"Sweet? The woman I swapped my bedroom with, in exchange for sleeping on a cot in the pantry is down-right unhospitable."

"Serves you right." The sheriff held on to his sides and roared with laughter. "What were you thinking setting her up to sleep in a pantry?"

"I didn't want to delay her arrival until a proper room is ready. It seemed like a good idea at the time." Ace removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. "Anyway, she has suitable accommodations now."

"Good for her. I sure would like to see you trying to sleep curled up on that cot." Hiram waggled his eyebrows. "You may have met

your match, my friend."

"I'm certainly paying my penance for the error." Ace avoided his gaze and scanned the horizon for a hint of the approaching locomotive.

"Tell me what you need from me." Hiram placed a calloused hand on his shoulder.

"I ordered a basket of food from the diner, and in my rush to meet Mercy this morning, I forgot to pick it up. Can you take it by the house for me and check on the children?"

"Sure, and I'll look in on them every day as we discussed."

"Send me a wire to let me know how they're doing and if you see anything suspicious going on at the house." Ace nodded toward the pastor and his wife making their way toward him. "So much for word leaking about me going out of town again."

"You mean you're afraid she might receive visitors? Maybe a couple of those cowpokes that saw her today will come calling and woo her away? Or are you more concerned about the pastor's wife and some of her old-biddy friends?"

"Take your pick." As if on cue, a whistle sounded. Clouds of steam and fire shot up from an arriving locomotive. "There's the added stress caused from the Holton gang, being on the loose. It pays to be cautious. Keep me informed."

"Informed about suspicious characters or your wife?"

"Both. Help ease things for her until I return next week."

Mercy poured heated water into the sink and watched soap bubbles float past the cast-iron stove along the back wall toward the stone chimney before bursting. *I'm going to count my blessings. I am safe in a lovely home filled with children who deserve my attention.*

Thea squealed and attempted to catch a bubble in her hand. "Do it again."

"Uh oh, you've done it now, Miss Mercy. You're going to be making bubbles all night." David added a stack of plates to a pile.

"My sisters and I used to enjoy blowing soapsuds when we were little. It certainly made the household chores fun."

Jack reached for a dishtowel. "Nothing fun about doing women's work."

"Why is working in the kitchen designated to women? You boys enjoy eating, don't you?"

Jack nodded but avoided her gaze. "Don't like the cleaning, though."

"One of my mother's favorite sayings was, 'Many hands make the work light.' My sisters and I used to work together in the evenings as

efficiently as we could so that we could play games after supper."

Mercy scrubbed a dish with more force than necessary, attempting to recreate a parade of bubbles, and succeeded in making the water fill with foam. She cupped a few suds in her hand and blew and was rewarded with another round of squeals from Thea. Then she placed foam in each of the children's hands and encouraged them to follow suit. Her mood lifted with their laughter.

"I can blow the biggest one," Jack boasted.

"No, I can," David countered.

Mercy's lips lifted as she watched bubbles float out the window. Her eyes followed their journey before disappearing into the blue sky lined by oak trees. The babble from the creek, combined with the water wheel from the mill, created a pleasant melody but did little to soothe her frustration with her new husband. "When we traveled from town, I didn't realize how close we were to the lumbermill."

"Yes ma'am, we can travel on foot across the bridge and be in town in just a few minutes." David puffed out his chest. "We take our time going to school, though."

"Don't you like school?"

"Sure don't. It's too hard for David to sit still. Then he gets us both in trouble." Jack narrowed his gaze toward his younger brother.

"You're the one who is always squirming." David clenched his fists.

Mercy clucked her tongue. "My middle sister struggles with sitting in one place for any amount of time."

Thea appeared by her side. "What about you? Didn't you want to get up and wiggle?"

Mercy laughed. "Probably, but I enjoyed school. My favorite day was Friday when we had the spelling bee."

"I'm terrible at spelling. But I'm better at math now since Pa taught us how to cipher using cards."

"That sounds fun. You boys will have to show me your game, and then we'll have to create one for spelling too."

"Really?"

"Me too?" Thea

"Of course, we will all play."

The backdoor slammed, and a voice called, "Hello in the house."

"Uncle Hiram." Thea extended her arms and flung herself towards the man as though she hadn't seen him in months. "I missed you."

The sheriff placed a picnic basket on the table, brought Thea into a warm embrace, and settled her back on the ground. He tipped his hat. "Ace felt bad about forgetting to pick up the food he ordered from the diner and asked me to drop it by."

"Thank you, Sheriff. After we finish the dishes, I was planning on

searching the cupboards. What a relief it will be not to have to fix supper this evening."

Jack scrunched his nose and waved a dish towel. "Uncle Hiram, don't you think washing dishes is women's work?"

"Not at my house." The sheriff winked.

"That's 'cause you ain't got a housekeeper." Jack scowled.

The sheriff's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Family has to pitch in where it is needed. Some jobs are better than others. I always hated slopping the hogs when I was a kid, and my sister hated gathering the eggs. So sometimes we would swap."

Mercy began unpacking the contents from the basket. "Sheriff, won't you join us?"

"It would be my pleasure." Hiram offered a broad smile, then turned his attention to David and Jack. "Boys, how about if you take care of my horse while Thea and I help your new ma set out dinner."

Chapter 9

"The Bible teaches we are to 'Do everything in love.' Square your shoulders and press on, and with enough perseverance, your efforts will bear fruit. Some days are easier than others."
– Miss Mercy Marigold Fairchild – Piano Teacher

Mercy sank in a chair on the front porch across from the sheriff. Her mouth lifted at the sight of the children chasing pops of lights from a family of fireflies. "I'm surprised to see lightning bugs out this early."

"I reckon the mild winter fooled them into thinking the season was later than it is."

"It is a warm, humid evening. I understand their confusion." She blinked her weary eyes, attempting to focus on the next appearance of flashing lights.

"There's something I think you should know." The sheriff rose to his feet, leaned his back against the porch railing, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Your husband is my best friend, and I can't imagine loving the children more if they were my own. Even so, Ace would tan my hide if he knew what I'm about to say, but I think everyone would get along a lot better if you knew."

"Another revelation?" Mercy's hand flew to her throat. "I'm not sure my heart can stand another one, Sheriff."

"You are bound to be disappointed with the way things turned out, but in my estimation, you and Ace will manage to work things out and make a success of this marriage."

"This time yesterday, my heart felt full as though it would burst with optimism. Now I feel devoid of anything but disappointed hope."

"Something tells me you've got a bit of pluck left." Hiram's eyes rested on David, who was placing another bug in Thea's mason jar. "Which is why I want to give you a bit of background. Ace married my wife's youngest sister, Lottie. While their looks were similar, she and Laura were as opposite as the sun and the moon. Lottie and Ace met before the war while they were working on a riverboat. She was a beauty, and men swarmed around her like bees on honey."

"I must be quite the disappointment to him, then." Mercy blinked rapidly.

"Not hardly. You're a lovely woman, and if no one has ever told you that, the men in Georgia must be blind."

"There was so much devastation after Sherman completed his march to the sea. So many of the boys I grew up with never survived.

Those who did headed west." Mercy twisted her hands in her lap. "That's why my father thought the matrimonial agency was an answered prayer."

"God answers in His own way and in His own time." Hiram rubbed his chest, staring into the distance. "When Ace started working for the railroad, he convinced my sister-in-law to settle down and marry. At first, she seemed happy. But, with the arrival of each child, Lottie became moody, sulky, and dissatisfied. Thea was about a month old when she left the children with a neighbor along with a note telling Ace not to try to find her."

"How terrible."

"Ace was distraught and hired an investigator to look for her. Unfortunately, Thea was a sickly baby, and between caring for her and the boys, there was little he could do but wait." Hiram's mouth pressed into a thin line. "By the end of the summer, he received confirmation that Lottie returned to life working on the riverboat but succumbed to yellow fever and was buried in a mass grave in New Orleans."

The sheriff placed his hands behind his back and began to pace, pausing in front of her. "My sister lived here in Trickling Springs and offered to help with the children temporarily. It wasn't long afterward that Ace decided a change of scenery would do everyone some good. So, we pulled up stakes and relocated."

"What a wonderful friend you are to go with him."

"Ace saved my life during the war. There is nothing I won't do to help him, and I love the children as if they were my own." Hiram's eyes grew misty. "About the same time Lottie left, I was doing a bit of grieving of my own. Helping Ace nurse little Thea through colic and caring for the boys was a bonding experience I can't explain. If I hadn't come with him, it would have been like losing my wife and child all over again. So, there was no question. I had to come."

Mercy nodded. "While I can't relate to losing a spouse and a child, I know about grief. My mother's illness dragged on for years. I don't know what was harder—losing my mother or watching my father lose himself in his grief."

"I'm sure you were a comfort to him." His mouth quivered. "My sister was a godsend. But she married and moved to a ranch with her husband about a year and a half ago and has a baby of her own. Ace hasn't had a steady housekeeper since Holly left."

"If his treatment of me is any indication, I can see why." Mercy looked heavenward.

The sheriff shook his head and chuckled. "Ace employed poor judgment when he set you up in your makeshift room. But his intentions were good. He thought you would appreciate the

convenience of having indoor plumbing."

"When I saw the opulence of his home and then saw the closet he relegated me to, I lost my temper."

"Don't blame you. I'm proud you stuck up for yourself."

The sounds of squeals turned their attention to Thea, who was clapping her hands while David released the fireflies from the glass jar. "Why do you think Ace has so much trouble keeping a housekeeper? Of course, the children are spirited, but there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

"Ace being away all the time sure doesn't help. But I think Jack is just flat-out angry, and then David follows suit."

"Angry about their mother leaving?"

"I doubt the boys have much memory of her, but they sure miss their pa when he's away." The sheriff's mouth formed a grim line. "The teacher they have doesn't help matters. She calls them out in front of the other children and says it is no wonder their mother left them. What's more, she makes reference to Lottie working in a saloon. Of course, it doesn't take much to get tongues wagging. Some of the church members won't allow the boys to be around their children now. But there's nothing to be done about that, I suppose."

"I beg to differ with you on that score, Sheriff." Mercy lifted her chin. "Maybe the reason God saw fit to send me here is to make a difference in these children's lives. I won't shirk my responsibility."

Chapter 10

"My favorite color is red. As far as dislikes, I hate muted colors. Better to be bold and flashy, or why bother?"
–Agent Ace Caldwell – Railroad Detective

Mercy felt refreshed after the unaccustomed luxury of a warm bath. After unpacking, she made use of items from her hope chest. Tired from days of travel, she nestled into the feather bed and the fresh linens for a restful night.

The morning sun rose over the horizon casting a narrow beam of light through the velvet-clad windows. She ran her hand along the miniature Diamond-in-a-Square quilt containing more than a thousand pastel squares that she and her mother pieced together over the years. The span of pastel calico and prints added a feeling of home to an otherwise formal and unwelcoming room.

Her thoughts drifted to the previous day, and her husband's somewhat delayed but gallant apology and offer to give her his bedroom. Only time would tell whether he was sincere or simply desperate for her to remain as a housekeeper. Her lips curved upward at the thought of him attempting to sleep on the cot in the pantry. Served him right. The man was an inconsiderate oaf.

There's no point lying here. I'll start breakfast. Mercy brushed and twisted her tawny-colored hair and quickly secured it with pins into a tidy bun. She glanced at her reflection in the full-length mirror and smoothed her calico skirt and matching blouse in a diamond pattern of indigo and cream, then tied her sash.

Her blue eyes sparkled at the inspection, then narrowed at the dark circles—a stark contrast to her pale cheeks. *Perhaps I didn't sleep as well as I thought.* Her skirts rustled, and her boots made soft taps on the wooden floors as she tiptoed into the kitchen. The new cast-iron stove her husband bragged about took up most of the back wall and stood cold and dark. Her eyes filled with unexpected tears. Horace's idea of marriage was so different from her own. All her hopes and dreams for a marriage built on mutual respect and companionship were as cold and empty as the massive stove.

Mercy tied the new apron around her waist and shook her head. Perhaps the famous newspaperman, Horace Greeley, who shared her husband's first name, fueled her imagination to envision her husband as serious and scholarly. Ace certainly was the epitome of one who would take the author's advice to, "Go West, Young Man, and grow up with the country." The nickname, Ace, evoked extravagance,

unrestraint, and danger—everything her parents taught her to avoid.

Straightening her shoulders, she pivoted to inspect the room. The cat stretched from its perch on the window seat. Rays from the rising sun streamed through a double window above lower cabinets, housing a shiny sink and pump. A dark walnut worktable doubled as a dining space and separated the stove from doors leading to the pantry and cellar. *Why am I here, Lord*? *Is it for the children*?

After banking the stove, Mercy made her way to the basement and root cellar to retrieve bacon and eggs. Instead, assorted piles of laundry strewn across the clay floor brought her up short.

"When Pa tells the boys to clean up, they throw all their dirty clothes down here." Thea appeared at the top of the steps. She wore a nightgown at least six inches too short, exposing her bare legs and feet, her auburn hair in disarray.

Mercy's hand flew to her throat. "Goodness, Thea, I didn't realize you were standing there. You frightened me."

"I thought you made that face because of the mess." The young girl reached for the cat and clutched him to her chest.

Hands on hips, Mercy glanced over her shoulder towards the stairs, then giggled. "This is exactly the sort of thing my youngest sister, Faith, is prone to do. Except her hiding place is under her bed."

"They hid stuff under their beds too."

"Oh my. Well, one thing at a time." Mercy waved her hand. "Would you like to help me bring the eggs and bacon upstairs? Then I'll show you how to make biscuits."

Mercy's mouth watered as she pulled the iron skillet from the wood-burning stove. The aroma of creamy grits, sausage, potatoes, melted cheese, and eggs greeted her. She was pleased with the number of ingredients available in the larder. It had been years since she'd had the luxury of more than essential ingredients, and even then, her family's portions were meager.

"Wow, something smells good." The swinging kitchen door swung back and forth with David's exuberant entrance.

"I made biscuits." Thea beamed.

"You left some of it on your face." Jack followed his brother into the room and scowled.

"You left a little evidence from all your hard work this morning. Your brothers are going to be impressed." Mercy lifted the tip of her apron and gently cleared the dust from Thea's face. "Children, if you will have a seat, breakfast is ready." Mercy placed a serving on each plate, then set a basket filled with biscuits on the table.

David eyed his plate hungrily. "What is this stuff?"

“I was feeling a little homesick, wondering how my sisters were getting along, and decided to make their favorite breakfast casserole. My mother used to make it for us on special occasions like our birthdays.”

“Looks like pig slop to me.” Jack folded his arms across his chest.

Mercy slid into her chair and met Jack’s scowl with a narrowed brow. “Before we continue, I have a few rules that will help us all enjoy meals together. These are not optional. First, mind your manners.” Mercy removed a checkered cloth, placed it in her lap, and cleared her throat, waiting for the children to do the same.

“Second, we express our gratitude for the food and the hands that prepared it through prayer and complimentary words.”

“What happens if we don’t?” David inclined his chin toward his brother.

“Perhaps the chronic complainer could prepare the next meal?”

“My brother and me can’t cook.”

“I’ll show you how to make biscuits.” Thea clasped her hands together and beamed again.

“An excellent idea. Everyone should know how to make biscuits.” Mercy placed her hands together and bowed her head. “Dear Lord, thank you for a safe trip and for sending me to this wonderful family. Help us to support one another as we go through our day. Make us truly grateful for the wonderful feast you set before us. Remind us that others may not be so fortunate this morning.”

David slathered his biscuit with butter. “Our old housekeeper gave us oatmeal for breakfast.”

“Do you like oatmeal?”

He nodded and bit into a biscuit. Thea took a bite of the casserole, and her eyes widened. “This is lots better than oatmeal.”

Mercy poured milk into tin cups. “Why don’t you tell me about your school? Do you like your teacher?”

“Jack and David don’t like school.” Thea waved her fork. “Their teacher says they’re going to grow up ignorant.”

“Well, that certainly wasn’t kind, nor is it true.” Mercy passed the breadbasket toward Jack, noticing the flush appearing across his cheeks.

“I don’t need schoolin’. Just as soon as I get a little bit bigger, me and David are going with Pa and work on the railroad chasing bandits. We’re going to be famous.”

“I see,” Mercy added cream to her cup of coffee. “You don’t think you will need an education to be a successful lawman?”

“Naw, I just need a rifle and a six-shooter.” Jack took a bite of his biscuit.

“How does one go about hunting for outlaws?” Mercy bit her lip

to hide her smile as David began devouring the casserole. “First, Pa studies the wanted posters, and he gets messages by telegram. Then he scopes the varmints’ route out on a map.”

“Your father must be able to read, write, and use mathematics and map skills as well.”

“Pa is really smart. I’ll let him do all that stuff for me.” Jack polished off his biscuit.

“I’m sure he would be happy to help, but what if your pa isn’t available, and you received an important message?”

“We’d be in a heap of trouble.” David nodded solemnly.

“When I was a young girl, we lived in a remote area, and my mother taught me and my sisters at home. If we worked hard and paid attention, we often completed our lessons by lunchtime. Then, after chores, we were free in the afternoon to play until my father came home for supper.”

“That’s it? Your ma just made you study in the morning?” David’s freckled face puckered.

“Yes, unless we dragged our feet.” Mercy’s mouth lifted at Jack’s raised eyebrow. A lock of wavy hair caressed his forehead, reminding her of his father. *I suppose that’s why Ace has* a *boyish charm*. *Where did that thought come from*? She smoothed her napkin across her skirt. “My favorite time of the day was in the evenings. My father would listen to what we learned, and then he would read us a story from the Bible.”

Jack groaned. “The Bible is boring.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that. There are so many stories about battles and mighty men in the Bible. One of my favorites is about an unlikely hero who was so afraid of his enemies he hid while threshing his wheat.”

“Sounds like a yellow-belly snake.” Jack rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t be afraid as long as I have my gun.”

“The fellows in Bible times used big swords.” David made a slashing motion with his fork.

“True, the unusual thing about Gideon is God called him to defeat an army with only three hundred men carrying torches in clay pots.” Mercy tapped her finger along the blue-speckled pitcher.

“You’re joshing.”

“Not at all. Although, I admit it sounds far-fetched.”

David scratched his chin. “I’d like to hear more about this fellow ‘cause I don’t want to grow up to be an ignoramus.”

“If you boys promise to study hard, we could start lessons this morning. Afterward, we can go into town. The sheriff says there’s a Founders Day celebration this afternoon.”

Jack huffed. “You aren’t pulling anything on me. I know this trick. We go into town, and you drop us at the jailhouse, then head out of

town.”

Chapter 11

"*Never corner something meaner than you, especially if she's your wife*."
– Agent Ace Caldwell – Railroad Detective

Ace clucked to his horse and made his way to the two-storied, stone livery in Trickling Springs. He took in a deep breath, thinking about the work awaiting him with the railroad. His time away, initially scheduled for three days, stretched into almost as many weeks. Even so, he was no closer to putting a stop to the Holton gang robbing and creating chaos across the state of Texas.

Pressing his hand over his chest, he felt the weight of the telegrams that Hiram sent daily. Could things really be going as well as he communicated? His heart wrenched. It was becoming more challenging to continue the job he loved without sacrificing his family life. What must Mercy think? His mouth twitched at the thought of her raised chin, defiantly challenging him over sleeping arrangements. *I sure hope she lives up to her name. She has good reason to be madder than a man playing with a marked deck*.

Passing the railroad depot, bank, and hotel, he steered his horse toward the livery. The stable owner called a greeting. "Afternoon, stranger."

"Don't rub it in, Amos. I feel guilty enough." His horse tossed his head as if in agreement, adding a low, rumbling nicker.

"Your trips out of town are extending longer by weeks at a time." Amos took the reins. "We've all enjoyed getting to know that pretty little wife of yours."

"Is that a fact?"

"Sure, she's been a godsend tutoring my son along with yours in the mornings. Then they come back here and put a little work in mucking out stalls. It's been good for all three of them."

"The sheriff sent word the boys are working for you in the afternoon. I thought maybe they would be here?" Ace dismounted, and a blend of harness oil, leather, hay, and manure reached his nostrils, reminding him of the similar stench his sons wore to his wedding.

"Your new bride came up with a reward system for our sons. If they apply themselves with their schoolwork, do their chores at home, and here in the afternoon, we give them Friday afternoon off. So today, they're fishing at your place."

"The last time I was here, your report of my boys was less than stellar. I'm surprised you allowed them to spend time at my place."

“They’re still your boys.” Amos shot him a lopsided grin. “But I’ve seen an improvement in their behavior. Maybe just the steady presence of a good woman was all the encouragement they needed.”

Ace rubbed his mare’s neck. “Hiram keeps me up-to-date with telegrams, which puts my mind at ease. But there’s something he’s not telling me.”

“What makes you say that?”

Ace glanced over his shoulder. The reflection of the afternoon sun on the steep tin roof of the jailhouse gave it the appearance of silver, which was a direct contrast to the mud-colored sandstone. A soft wind blew the wooden sign hanging above the sheriff’s office, causing an occasional squeak. “Because I know my children.”

“Maybe you’d best go check while I tend to your horse.” Amos chuckled then led Ace’s dappled gray mare into a stall.

“Sure you don’t have them tied up somewhere?” Hands on hips, Ace spun on his heel and eyed the empty jail cells.

“If I had them tied up, Thea would have figured out a way to cut them loose by now.” The sheriff’s shoulders shook with laughter.

“As soon as I get a fresh mount, I’m heading home. Give it to me straight. How are they doing?” Ace rubbed the back of his neck.

Hiram flicked his hat to the back of his head with his fingers and grinned. “Your new bride has David and Thea eating out of the palm of her hand, which annoys Jack to no end. Even so, other than the smoking incident, things are relatively calm.”

“What smoking incident?”

“On Founders Day, Jack, David, and a couple of boys hid behind the mercantile, smoking some of your fancy cigars. When Mercy found them, they were already beginning to be sick. By the time I reached them, she was standing there as calm as you please while Jack tried to convince her you taught him everything there is to know about smoking. Needless to say, they were all as sick as dogs.”

“I don’t understand the obsession the boys have with cigars.”

“That’s not hard to figure since, more often than not, you have one in your hand. They associate them with you.” Hiram shrugged. “They’re trying to imitate their pa.”

Ace pinched the bridge of his nose. “Do you think that’s the only thing they see when they look at me? I would hope I have other accomplishments worth imitating.”

“It’s funny what kids pick up on. Hopefully, you can stick around long enough to set them straight?”

“If this is an attempt to make me feel guilty for staying away longer than I anticipated, it’s not going to work. I feel bad enough

without you adding to the mix. Even so, I wasn't in any hurry to come home to that banshee of a wife who stole my bed." Ace removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair.

"The way I remember it, you gave up your bed willingly. But you will be pleased to know the work on the attic space is complete. Frank finished framing and painting last week."

The sound of his brother-in-law's laugh caused his mouth to turn upward. "That was quick."

"I had to do some fast talking to quash a rumor or two after David told the workers the room was for you, so you wouldn't have to sleep in the pantry. I told Frank you needed room for guests."

"A special agent is arriving on the next train, and the extra room will come in handy. This business with the Holton gang is keeping me on edge. I'm working night and day looking for leads. I was so close to apprehending the bandits, but they were tipped off, and I missed them by a few hours."

"You've been traveling for two and a half weeks. Now you need to spend time with your family. That new wife of yours could use your support at home. Although, Mercy may be right when she said we won't have to worry about them and cigars anytime soon. Don't know when I've seen a kid so green around the gills."

"You say there were other boys with them?"

"The blacksmith's son was there. But Amos took it in stride as Mercy did. The physical repercussions were worse than any punishment they could come up with." Hiram waggled his eyebrows. "On the other hand, the man is so smitten he would have agreed to just about anything."

"I should have known something was up when Amos was singing her praises." Ace opened and closed his fists. "Mercy is carrying on with the blacksmith."

"Don't be ridiculous. Her manners are above reproach. But Amos was transfixed. The next thing I knew, he agreed to join David and Jack on the front row at church. The sight of your boys sitting with Amos and his sons does my heart good."

"Wait a minute, where was Thea during this time?"

"She sits with Mercy on the piano stool."

"Mercy is playing the piano at church?"

"Yep, that's what she and the pastor were talking about right before your wedding. We don't have anyone playing regularly since Mrs. Adams moved back east. So your new bride is well received."

"Must be if Amos is attending service," Ace muttered.

"It's easy to see why. He's a widower like you and me and knows what it feels like to feel lonesome."

"I'm too busy to be lonely." Ace opened and closed his fists again.

“Even so, it’s easy to be impressed by your wife. She’s beautiful, a talented musician, and has a persuasive manner.”

“Sounds to me like she’s some sort of murderous mermaid leading you men to your demise. You ought to know better than to be lured in by a woman.”

“Come on, Ace, you know that dog won’t hunt. Mercy is not luring anyone. All I’m saying is you have a wife and family to be proud of, so take some time to appreciate the good things in your life.”

Ace began pacing, his boots making loud clunking noises on the wooden floors. “Thea won’t stay put for more than five minutes. I can’t imagine her sitting in church regardless of my esteemed wife’s talent tickling the ivory keys.”

“You can see for yourself this Sunday. She will be sitting on the piano stool, right next to Mercy, looking as pleased as a pig rolling in mud.”

“Church? Not me, brother. My time is best spent working on rounding up this gang and working day and night until we come up with a plan to bring the Holton gang to justice.”

Chapter 12

"Marriage is a lot like poker. Learning to negotiate the lesser cards between you and your spouse gets tricky."
–Agent Ace Caldwell – Railroad Detective

"Ew, I won't do it, and you can't make me," Thea squealed, then dropped the worm into the creek and giggled.

"That's the second time she's wasted a worm. If she can't bait her hook, she shouldn't be fishing." Jack's freckled face reddened.

"Don't waste any more bait." Mercy walked over to the young boy and spoke softly, "Thea doesn't really want to fish. She just enjoys being with you."

"I'll bait her hook," the blacksmith's son offered. Rays of sunlight shone on his hair, highlighting ginger strands. His brown eyes fringed by dark eyelashes overwhelmed his thin face. "But she's got to quit squealing. She's scaring the fish away."

"Thank you, Mark." Mercy's mouth curved upward at the sight of David—his fishing pole in hand, his gaze locked on Jack as he cast his line. "If you boys promise me to stay here on the bank, I'll take Thea with me and give her another swimming lesson."

"Don't know how she's going to learn to swim when the water's not over her head." Jack nodded his chin toward his sister, who immediately stuck out her tongue.

"That's the best place to learn when you're four." Mercy waved. "You boys enjoy yourself; Thea and I will be at the swimming hole and will return for you in an hour."

"Can I squeal at the swimming hole?"

"You sure can." Mercy reached for the child's hand and met her smile. She looked adorable wearing a pair of her brother's former overalls and gingham shirt, her auburn hair covered by a straw hat. Mercy retrieved a towel from her basket and took Thea's hand, creeping their way down a steep rocky path. They paused at the sight.

Five cascades flowed from a fifty-foot-high limestone cliff into a cave draped with moss and fern. The spilling water beat a rhythmic sound on the rock, sending tiny droplets in various directions. "This is my favorite place." Thea beamed. "The turtles like it too."

"Yes, I agree, and wading can be so much more fun than fishing." Mercy left her dress, shoes, and stockings on a smooth boulder next to Thea's overalls. Then, choosing only to wear her shift, with Thea dressed in her brother's oversized shirt, they inched toward large rocks in the middle of the stream, creating a barrier and forming a

shallow swimming hole.

Thea shrieked, then retreated from the tranquil pool. “The water is freezing.”

“Let’s hurry to the middle. Once we’re totally wet, it won’t feel like such a shock.” The water flowed around their feet, and hand in hand, they splashed their way to the middle. A large fish swam between them, and Thea squealed again.

“This must be where all the fish are today.” Mercy led Thea toward a massive group of stones that formed a circular limestone swimming hole filled with blue-green water. “Hold on to my hand while I make sure it’s safe to wade in this location. Remember, the water rushes around, so we’ll need to be careful stepping since it’s rough and rocky.” Kneeling, Mercy sucked in a deep breath as the cool water welcomed her. “Are you ready for your swimming lesson?”

With the town at his back, The horses plodded along, creating a relaxing rhythm as they traveled toward home. Ace circled his head around his shoulders, dreading the greeting he expected to receive from Mercy. He motioned toward a group of massive oak trees and white flowering yucca plants clinging to large boulders. “Do you mind if we swing by the fishing hole first? I’d like a chance to speak to my sons before I greet the wife.”

His friend, Agent Mack Thomas, tilted his head back and laughed. “Spoken like a true detective. Best check the lay of the land before proceeding.” Mack motioned toward a trail of bluebonnets scattered with Indian paintbrush ones. “If it were me, I’d pick a few of those purple and pink flowers to go along with your apology.”

Ace leaned forward, clucking to his horse. “No need to apologize. I have a job to do. Now I want to know if she’s been doing hers.”

“I thought you were kidding when you said you married for convenience.” Agent Moore pushed his hat to the back of his head. The afternoon sun illuminated his light brown hair, which matched the golden tone of his palomino. Both shared the same mischievous, dark eyes. “Let me rephrase that. I thought you were alluding to the companionship one attains when taking a wife.”

Ace avoided his friend’s gaze and motioned toward a group of trees. “Let’s tie our horses here. If I remember correctly, the boys’ favorite spot is downhill a bit, where the river and creek meet. But we’ll be able to see if they’re here.”

Mack shook his head. “The water is crystal-clear and almost as blue as the afternoon sky. Looks like paradise. I don’t know how you can leave it as often as you do.”

Ace followed his friend’s gaze and rested on the boys clad in

overalls and straw hats. He placed two fingers between his lips and whistled, gaining the attention of his sons. David and Jack broke out into wide grins, then ran up the hill to greet him.

"Pa, we didn't think you'd ever get back." Both boys wrapped their arms around his waist.

"Good to see you too. I missed you." Ace embraced his children. They smelled of soap and sunshine, and he brought them closer to his chest.

"Pa, you're squashing us again." David squirmed.

"Sorry, kid." Ace straightened. "Jack and David, this is Agent Thomas, and he's going to be staying with us for a few days."

"Afternoon, boys." Mack greeted both children with a handshake.

Ace scanned the horizon. "Last time I was home, you complained about Thea always tagging along with you everywhere. How did you two convince your sister to stay home?"

"We didn't. She's been bothering us all afternoon. So, Mercy took her over to the falls." Jack thrust his fists in his pockets

David gestured with his thumb. "Thea likes it over there, 'cause she can hunt for turtles and squeal, and nobody cares."

Ace stiffened. "The undercurrent there can be powerful. That seems a dangerous place to take a rambunctious four-year-old."

"We're just glad Mercy tends to her, so we can fish in peace." Jack folded his arms.

Ace rubbed the back of his neck. "Why don't you two go on and collect your fish and poles and meet us back at the house? I'll go make sure your sister is okay."

The pair's boots made crunching noises along the rocky path. Mack motioned with his thumb. "I can hear the falls."

"Yep, we're close. There's a shortcut that will put us next to the cave where the water spews from a limestone cliff. The swimming hole is on the other side." A muscle in Ace's jaw twitched as he increased his pace. His eyes roamed the pebble beach. A squeal sounded, then his daughter's voice shrieked, "Help me. I'm drowning."

Ace took off toward the sound and was brought up short by his wife clad in wet underclothes perching on a rock. His daughter was clinging to her bare legs grinning from ear to ear. Mercy's arms and shoulders were exposed, and the cream-colored undergarment clung to her curves.

"Wouldn't mind coming home to a sight like that." Mack pushed his hat to the back of his head and stared.

"What in tarnation is the woman thinking?" His soaking-wet daughter clad only in a gingham shirt giggled. "Do it again."

"All right, one more time, but after this, we have to stop. My legs are tired." Mercy dropped down, immersing his daughter into the

water. His heart sank, and he rushed toward the pebbled beach. Thea reappeared, tendrils of wet hair clinging around her face. “Again, please.”

“Woman, have you lost your mind?” Ace cupped his hands around his mouth. “Thea, get out of the water now.”

Mercy gasped, then lowered Thea back to a standing position in the water. “Go ahead over to your pa. I need to grab a towel and my clothes.”

“Nothing to get all worked up about, Ace. Looks like the water isn’t even waist-high.” Mack nodded toward his daughter, who was scurrying and splashing her way towards him.

“Your clothes are over here, ma’am.” Mack reached for a stocking and extended it to Ace with a wide grin. “Maybe you ought to be the one to give them to her. Then, like a good friend, I’ll go pick some flowers to go along with your apologies.”

“Very funny.”

In her hurry to dress, Mercy threw her calico dress over her wet shift. The decision seemed prudent, but now with water pooling down her legs and puddling around her bare feet, she regretted the choice. Placing the towel across her shoulders, she seethed, “How dare you refer to my behavior as indecent. Your daughter and I were alone in a secluded location.”

“Not so secluded that someone couldn’t walk up on you at any time.”

“I have been here nearly three weeks, and other than your brother-in-law and the men you have working on the attic, we have few guests. Those who do call limit their visits to the house. No one would ever know we were here.”

“Wasn’t hard for me to figure out.” Ace’s gaze wandered from her bare feet and lingered on her torso. “What about the boys? They don’t need to see you running around half-naked.”

“We have a system. The boys know to wait until I return to collect them after Thea’s swimming lesson.” Mercy felt her cheeks flame. “You leave your children to be raised by strangers in a home outfitted like a saloon, and you accuse me of being improper?”

“What do you know about what a saloon looks like?” Ace posted his hands on his hips. His eyes narrowed. “I ought to be able to bring a guest home without worrying my wife is going to give him an eyeful.”

“Whose fault is that?” Mercy lifted her chin. “The least you could do was to let me know you would be arriving today.”

Standing toe to toe, Ace scowled. “I send a telegram to Hiram

every day to let him know my schedule."

"Is that a fact? Well, I haven't seen the sheriff since yesterday." Mercy dug her fingernails into her palms. "And I don't appreciate receiving information from another source. If you have something to communicate to me, try sending it to me directly. I'm perfectly capable of reading a telegram."

"Duly noted." He leaned closer.

Mercy studied the stubble on his square jaw and the fullness of his bottom lip and swallowed hard. *The man is undoubtedly handsome. It's a shame he's so obnoxious*.

Chapter 13

"If God could use a coward to lead a small army with weapons of pottery and torches to save the Israelites, surely I can handle three small children."
– Miss Mercy Marigold Fairchild – Piano Teacher

Mercy placed a bouquet of wildflowers in a jar and centered it on the table. "Thank you again for the flowers, Mr. Thomas. When I left Georgia, the dogwoods and azaleas were only beginning to bloom. These bluebonnets certainly rival the beauty of the flowers native to my home. The bouquet makes me feel a little less homesick."

"My pleasure, Miss, and thank you for dinner. I don't know when I've looked forward to a meal more."

"You will refer to my wife as Missus, Agent Thomas." A muscle in his jaw twitched.

"Of course, my apologies." The detective's eyes sparkled mischievously, and he reached for her hand, pressing it to his lips. "May I say the man who claims you as his wife is indeed fortunate."

"Thank you." Turning on her heel, Mercy avoided her husband's gaze and wrapped a towel around a blue speckled kettle. "Would you care for coffee?"

"Yes, I sure would." Agent Thomas accepted his cup, then rose to pull out the ladder-back chair for Mercy. "Ma'am," he nodded and repositioned the chair.

"You're pushing your luck, Mack." Ace's fist opened and closed.

"Am I? I wouldn't think you would mind me showing your missus a bit of courtesy."

Mercy's gaze wandered between the two men. Ace's dark eyebrows drew together, his lips pressed into a thin line, while Agent Thomas leaned back in his chair and grinned. *What in the world is going on between these two*? "Who would like to say the blessing?"

"It's my turn." Thea clasped her hands together.

"Go ahead then. I'm starving." Ace turned his attention to his daughter, and his face softened.

"*Dear God, thank you for bringing Pa home and his friend too. Thank you for growing Mercy's legs so strong she can toss me in the water. Thank you for the food and make my brothers grateful. Amen*." Thea beamed. "I'm learning to cook, too."

Mercy passed the breadbasket towards Ace. Their eyes met, and she quickly averted her gaze. Thankful no one seemed to notice, she turned her attention to the savory beef broth with large chunks of beef and vegetables. "Since you've been gone, the boys have been working

hard on their studies, and Thea is learning her letters."

Ace placed his hand on the back of his daughter's head. "What are you teaching her for already? Let her be a kid for a while longer."

"I'm not a kid. I'm a girl." Thea's eyebrows narrowed, and she puckered her lips. Mercy's mouth curved upward at the sight. All three children adopted their father's furrowed brow when frustrated.

David gave a snaggletoothed smile. "Good thing Miss Mercy keeps her busy. Thea hasn't used the scissors on anything she's not supposed to in a week."

Mercy nodded toward the rag doll. "Your daughter is already an excellent student and enjoys learning. She's practicing sewing too and wants to make her own doll clothes."

"It's just strips of cloth, nothing to get all excited about." Jack looked heavenward.

"Thea thinks she made a beautiful blanket." David snickered.

"These are swaddling clothes like Baby Jesus wears." Thea raised her rag doll, now devoid of her dress and wrapped in strips of calico. "Mercy made this for me. Her name is Sally."

"You swaddled Sally very well, Thea. You will make an excellent mother one day." Mercy positioned Thea's napkin in her lap and waited for the other children to do the same. "When you're a little older, I'll show you how to make a patchwork quilt for your doll."

"Like the one on your bed with the tiny little squares?" Thea placed her thumb and finger close together.

"My first quilt was a design with large blocks. My mother taught me, and then I taught my sisters."

"How come your ma didn't teach your sisters?" Jack watched his father remove the vegetables from his stew, placing them on his plate, then did the same.

"My mother grew sick when I was a young girl, and I took over the housekeeping and caring for our family." Her eyebrows narrowed at the discarded green beans and carrots. "I know you don't care for vegetables, but it's important to eat them if you are going to grow up and be strong."

"Pa don't eat vegetables, and he looks all right to me." Mercy followed the boy's nod and raised an eyebrow toward Ace, hoping for some encouraging words for his son.

"A completely unnecessary commodity, in my opinion. Give me bread, meat, and potatoes, and I'm happy." Ace pierced a carrot and scowled. "Did you ever notice that an onion can make someone cry, but there's not a vegetable in the world that will make you smile?"

"They don't know what they're missing, ma'am. The stew is delicious." Mack closed his eyes, savoring the taste.

"Thank you, Mr. Thomas."

David eyed his stew, then stared at the detective. “Mr. Thomas is taller than you, Pa, so maybe Miss Mercy is right.”

Mercy bit her lip. “Perhaps Mr. Thomas’s upbringing was similar to mine. Food is not always plentiful. It’s best to eat what is put before you and be grateful.”

“Then we are kindred spirits, ma’am.” The detective flashed her a wide grin.

Ace stiffened, then sent another glare towards his friend before returning his attention to Mercy. “How old were you when you took over for your mother?”

“It was just after my tenth birthday.” Mercy forced a smile.

Ace’s eyes roamed between Jack and David. “You were just a kid yourself.”

“True, but I didn’t mind. In a way, it made our relationship grow stronger.” Mercy stared into the distance. “Although my role as caretaker put a strain on my younger sisters’ and my relationship at times. We pressed on and made the most of the situation.”

Ace leaned closer, his eyes twinkling. “I guess that’s why you are so stubborn. You started out being the boss a mite early.”

“I believe my sisters would agree with you.” She felt a bubble of laughter emit from her chest.

“Can I have more milk, please?” Jack gave an uncharacteristic smile. While Mercy poured, his lips turned downward. “Pa, she is making us eat this stuff and do chores too. Now that you’re home, you can set her straight.”

“Chores and study time will continue in the same manner. At any time, if you prefer to return to the school in town, you are free to do so.” Mercy passed Jack his cup, then turned her attention to Ace. “The children have plenty of time to play in the afternoon if they apply themselves in the morning.”

“What kind of chores?”

“Women’s work, like making our beds and drying dishes.” Jack folded his arms and huffed.

“You three are a lot to keep up with.” Ace patted her shoulder. “No need in putting the children to work. If you need assistance with the household, hire somebody to help.”

“Children need structure, discipline, and love.” *How do I make him understand the root of the children’s behavior problems is a lack of structure*? Mercy took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “The Bible teaches that we are to train up a child in the way they should go so that when they grow up, they will know how to lead productive lives.”

“Papa works on the train, and I help Miss Mercy.” Thea placed a green bean between her fingers and squashed it.

“I’d rather do my chores and stay home and let Miss Mercy teach us than go back to school.” David glared at his brother. “I don’t care if we do have to eat vegetables. She’s nice and is teaching me to read.”

Mack reached for the breadbasket. “When I was growing up, my pa made sure we all pitched in with clearing the table. My mother taught us all to cook simple meals too. She always said, ‘for a family to prosper, everyone needs to pitch in and help.’”

“It ain’t right for us to do *her* work.” His oldest son’s eyes filled with tears.

“It *isn’t* right,” Mercy corrected.

“See there? She admits it’s the truth,” Jack jeered.

Mercy spoke softly to the young boy. “We’ve discussed this. You will speak to me respectfully, and *ain’t* isn’t a proper word.”

“Who cares what you think?” Jack rose quickly, upsetting his chair. “Tell her, Pa. She can’t tell us what to do unless you say it is all right.”

“That’s enough,” Ace’s voice thundered. “Apologize, now.”

The young boy’s freckled face flushed. “I don’t see why I should. The only reason you married her is ‘cause we need a housekeeper who can’t quit.”

“Don’t make me get up from this chair, son. We’re waiting.”

Jack stared at his boots. “Sorry,” he muttered.

A small hand touched her elbow. David’s brow furrowed. “Don’t pay him no mind. My brother’s just touchy about not being able to read. He wants you to leave because he’s afraid Thea is going to learn before him.”

“Take that back.” Jack lunged at David, waving his fist.

“Won’t take it back. Everybody reads better than you.” David rose from his seat and shoved his brother.

“No,” Thea screeched, kicked her feet, and tears rolled down her cheek. “Don’t leave.”

Bolting to his feet, Ace took both boys by the shoulders. “To the parlor, now!”

Mercy wrapped Thea in an embrace. “Hush now, sweetie. No one is going anywhere.” A soft chuckle drew Mercy’s attention toward Agent Thomas.

He waggled his eyebrows. “Another incentive with everyone pitching in and helping is there is more family time together in the evenings.”

Chapter 14

"*To win, you must be prepared to lose sometime. Then again, I rarely lose*."
– Agent Ace Caldwell – Railroad Detective

Mercy leaned against the porch railing and stared at an orange hue of the disappearing sun over the horizon. Male crickets singing their courtship song teased her with alternating chirps and trills as they called to their sweethearts. She sighed. Even insects know what it's like to be wooed by their beloveds. *Lord, I'm so frustrated. Is this truly what you want for me*? *A loveless marriage, an absent husband who seems intent on undermining any discipline I achieve when he returns home*.

"A penny for your thoughts." Ace's deep baritone voice interrupted her melancholy mood.

"I doubt you are truly interested." Mercy turned her attention toward dozens of fireflies illuminating the front yard with displays of blinking lights

"Try me."

"No, I don't think so." Her voice cracked.

"Listen, I don't understand Jack's reaction to you at the dinner table." Ace paused as he lit his cigar. "Do you think maybe you're too hard on the kid? He's only eight."

Mercy spun on her heel. "Too hard on him? If anything, I'm too lenient. If Jack is upset, it is because he's had little structure and no discipline in years."

"Jack's not one for routines. From the time he was born, he wanted to stay awake at night and sleep during the daytime."

"Don't tell me you altered your routine to suit his demands? How shocking." Mercy clucked her tongue.

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you, Miss Fairchild." His shiny boots hammered the wooden floor back and forth across the entire length of the deck before hesitating in front of her. "David and Thea certainly have formed their allegiance. I've never seen my boys go at each other like they did at supper. It figures it would be over a woman. Are you certain you're not treating Jack differently from the others?"

"Of course, I'm treating him differently. He is eight, David is six, and Thea is only four." Her chest rose and fell in a labored breath. "Your children are making great strides in their studies and behavior. With a bit of encouragement from you, Jack will settle into a routine and do the same."

"How about you and I make a deal?" Ace puffed, curled his lips,

then exhaled slowly, adding a spinning technique to small circles of smoke streaming into the evening sky. “Continue the routine with the younger two, and I’ll encourage Jack to be more receptive to what you’re trying to achieve. But you need to ease up on him a bit.”

“Do you mean, let him leave his clothes on the floor, neglect his schoolwork, and speak to me in a disrespectful manner?” Mercy’s nostrils flared. “Or is the ‘women’s work’ as he calls it too much?”

“The reason I pay a housekeeper is so my kids don’t have to be bothered with that sort of stuff. I want them to play and have fun while they can.” A muscle in his jaw twitched. “Having to take on an adult role as early as you did, surely you, of all people, should understand what I want for my children?”

“We’re back to that, are we? I am Miss Fairchild, the hired help, who will swoop in and give the children whatever they want. No need for schedules, schooling, or vegetables.”

“That is not what I meant. If you were just the housekeeper, I never would have offered you my room.”

“Certainly, you would have. Why you even need a bedroom here is a mystery to me.” She gave him a sideways glance.

“Things will not always be like this. Once this group of outlaws is behind bars, my schedule will settle down. In the meantime, I’m arranging more of my meetings to take place here.” He folded his arms and leaned against the porch railing.

“In that case, you and I need to work together.” Mercy posted both hands on her hips. “Jack already thinks he should be on equal footing with adults and be allowed to run amuck, smoking cigars, skipping school, and having no desire for anything but his own wants.”

“Now, hold on there. You’re making my son sound like the outlaws I chase. If you had any idea what he’s been through, you would understand.”

“I comprehend more than you know.” Mercy pressed her lips into a thin line, willing them not to tremble. “When my mother grew ill, I tried so hard to keep the family happy, hoping she wouldn’t worry. My middle sister, Grace, is especially difficult. Wanting to shield my mother from her tantrums, I made allowances and did her chores. When she outgrew her clothes, she received new ones. I gave in to her demands time and again to keep the peace.”

She smoothed her faded calico dress and sighed at the reminder of her self-imposed sacrifice. “My youngest sister and I love sewing, so making old things look new for her was like a game, a challenge we enjoyed. Even though Grace declined the invitation to join us, she resented us for being content. It was as though she couldn’t stand for us to be happy.” Her eyes flooded with tears. “Grace is self-focused,

silly, selfish, and it is entirely my fault. I should have applied more effort and not given in so easily. If I had done more, God would reward my efforts."

"You can't blame yourself for that. You were a child, taking on a job meant for an adult." The sweet aroma of cinnamon floated toward her in the form of assorted-sized circles of smoke, teasing her nostrils. *What in the world is wrong with me*? *I hate the smell of cigars*.

"Knowing what I know now, I don't want to make the same mistake." Her mouth wobbled. "My youngest sister Faith was mischievous and tried my patience, too. Fortunately for me, she has a tender heart and came around on her own. Whoever she marries will be blessed with a beautiful young woman who is sweet and kind and makes the best pies in the state of Georgia."

"Who taught her to make those pies?" Ace retrieved a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it into her hand.

"I did." Mercy swiped the stream of tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Did she want to learn to bake?"

"Not at first. But Faith loves to eat." Mercy gave a watery smile. "The family budget was always tight. So, she learned to make even the most meager ingredients taste delicious."

"You figured out a way to involve your sister in something of interest to her. Do you think you could do that with Jack?"

"I am trying." Mercy squirmed under his gaze. "The reason why I took on additional work tutoring his friends was in the hopes it would encourage all the boys to put their efforts into something constructive."

"You did that for Jack?" He pressed his palm on the banister and leaned closer. "Based on the conversation I had with the blacksmith, I thought maybe you were accommodating him?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Mercy looked heavenward. "Although it is true, Amos is certainly helpful, and his influence with your sons goes a long way. I'm happy to repay his kindness. Even so, I'm pleased with the results and thought Jack and I were beginning to make our way toward a more amicable relationship."

"Amos, is it?"

Mercy studied the shadowed stubble on his square jaw.

"On a first-name basis with the blacksmith, but you call your husband, mister."

"Maybe that's because my husband calls me by my maiden name." The warmth of his lips was a breath away, reminding her of the kiss they shared at the wedding. Suddenly, her shoulders shook with a loud hiccup. At the sound of a deep chuckle, heat rose from her neck to the roots of her hair, and she hiccupped again, this time burying

her face in the handkerchief.

“Wouldn’t have expected a sound like that to come from a pastor’s daughter. Not exactly prim and proper.”

“Go ahead and add that to my list of inefficiencies,” she hiccupped. “I can’t believe I’m carrying on like this. I never cry.”

Ace raised an eyebrow. “Seems like you’ve had a rough time of it these past months. You ought to be able to let it out. Maybe it will help you get over the sadness.”

“I am not sad. I am angry and disappointed.” Her chin dropped, then strong arms enveloped her in a warm embrace. She stiffened at first, then relaxed, resting her head against his chest. For a moment, her imagination took flight. She was not a caretaker but a bride in her husband’s arms. She was safe, wanted, and cherished.

He stroked her hair. “You have a right to be disappointed.”

Mercy sobbed. “I’m sorry, it’s not like me to lose control like this.”

Ace tilted her chin, and he brushed the pad of his thumb across her cheek. “I love the sound of your voice. The way you exaggerate your vowels is hypnotizing and makes me want to agree with anything you say.”

“Good, then we are making progress.” Mercy’s eyes burned, and her chest hurt, but she giggled despite her discomfort.

“There is no middle ground with you, is there?” Ace threw up his hands.

“Are you serious?” Mercy’s hands clenched, and her nails dug into the palm of her hands. “The children are making progress, but it was your appearance that lit a fire under Jack. I have never seen him so defiant. He is not only challenging my authority; your son is undermining yours.”

“How do you figure?”

“He feels abandoned and is begging for attention. Right now, he doesn’t care if his behavior is good or bad. As long as he has your attention, he wins.” She hiccupped, then pressed her hand to her chest. “One thing you need to understand, you may play to win, but in this instance, I carry the house advantage.”

Chapter 15

"*It's not about winning but making the most of things and having fun*."
– Miss Mercy Marigold Fairchild – Piano Teacher

"Remember, you promised to present a united front." Making their way onto the front porch, Mercy spoke softly.

"I went to church with you this morning, didn't I?" Ace paused to light a cigar and watched while his children coaxed their cat from under the house.

"True, and if my memory serves me correctly, you said you enjoyed the sermon. I know the boys enjoyed attending with you." She gave him a sideways glance.

"It wasn't so bad. It may have to become a regular habit, just so people understand you are a married woman. I didn't like the way some of those cowboys were ogling you."

"Don't be silly. No one was ogling anyone."

"Maybe you didn't notice because you had your nose buried in your music, but trust me, I know ogling when I see it." Ace pushed open the front door for Mercy, then followed her into the foyer. "Tell her, Mack. Am I exaggerating?"

Agent Thomas removed his hat and placed it over his heart. "I can't say what anyone else was doing. But I must say, you and Thea make a pretty picture sitting at the piano in your matching dresses. The fact that you're an accomplished pianist added to the ambiance."

"Watch it, Mack!" Ace shot his friend a warning glare.

"What did I say? I'm simply stating the facts. Your wife is talented and beautiful. If anyone is staring, that's the reason." Mack gave Mercy a slow smile.

"That's kind of you to say." Mercy's face flushed, adding a delightful pink to her smooth cheeks. She smoothed her two-piece dress. "Perhaps they were admiring my new frock. The dressmaker in town is certainly talented. I have to agree with Thea in her view that we are wearing 'princess' dresses."

Ace scowled. How anyone could call the simple calico pattern something fit for royalty was beyond him. Even so, it was an improvement over the rags she typically wore. She looked lovely; the deep pink of the floral-patterned gown perfectly complemented her honey-colored hair. Her slow southern drawl interrupted his thoughts.

"Everyone is amiable, and I admit to being taken back by so many accolades. In time, I imagine people will become accustomed to my

playing and me."

"Not likely, unless you wear a potato sack while you're playing." Ace pushed the pocket doors with more force than necessary, causing them to slide into their hiding spot with a loud thud. He stormed into the parlor, circled the room, then paused in front of a small table containing piles of ribbon, lace, and paper. "When I'm here, I use this room for business. There will be more men joining Agent Thomas and me here throughout the week. Is it necessary for these toys to be in here?" Still scowling, he picked up a rag doll wrapped in a checkered cloth that looked suspiciously like a napkin. "Where did all this stuff come from?"

"The dolls are made from handkerchiefs. And the paper and ribbon are there to help to curtail Thea's scissor obsession. It seems to be working. Other than trimming the buggy top's fringe, we haven't had a single incident."

"She cut the fringe on the surrey?" Ace stiffened.

"Yes, last Friday, she and I attended a sewing bee. The pastor's wife stopped to speak to me about something, and while my back was turned, she retrieved the scissors from my sewing basket and trimmed away." Mercy waved her hand. "Don't worry. I was able to make the repairs. Unless you know where to look, I doubt you would even know there is a slight deviation of the pattern."

Mack reached for a handkerchief doll and pointed at the monogram embroidered on the corner of the gown. "I guess this baby and you share the same initials, Ace. This one must be named for you, Grandpa."

"Very funny." Ace snatched the doll and ran his thumb over the design, then looked heavenward. "Do you know how much it costs to have these monogrammed?"

Mercy stepped closer and studied the embroidery. "I don't know, maybe fifty cents?"

"Fifty cents?" Ace's jaw clamped shut.

"It's an excellent stitch, so that seems a fair price." Mercy tapped her finger along her cheek. "Thirty-five cents?"

"No, ma'am, I'll have you know six handkerchiefs cost me more than your and Thea's new dresses combined."

"Seriously, that seems a great price even for such detailed work. Well, I will need to monogram you some new ones then." Mercy clucked her tongue. "Unless you want to be the one to tell Thea why you're disassembling her baby. This one is named Dorothy, I believe."

"Whoever heard of stuffing a handkerchief and calling it a doll?" His mouth twitched at the slight tilt of her head and the sway of her hips as she circled the table.

"I commissioned one of the workers you hired to complete the

attic to make the small-scale furniture. Thea has tea parties with her dolls or puts together a puzzle while I teach the boys in the mornings. I didn't think you would mind us using the space. But we can move everything into the kitchen area instead. The room is certainly large enough."

He pulled on his collar and averted his gaze. "You said you wanted to talk to me about this card game you've been playing with the kids?"

"At first, I didn't know what to think when the boys said you played 'Blackjack' with them to help them with arithmetic. But now I see how the game can help build confidence, addition, subtraction, and memory." Mercy's eyes sparkled, and two dimples framed her lips.

"It's good to know we finally agree on something." Ace puffed his cigar, curled his lips, then exhaled slowly,

Yes, who says miracles can't happen?" Mercy gave a saucy grin.

Ace raised an eyebrow. *Is the woman flirting with me*? His heart hammered when she placed her hand on his sleeve, speaking softly.

"In keeping up the appearance that we are a united team. I don't want it to look as though we're taking things too seriously. After all, it is only a game, and I want the children to think we're having fun."

"You want me to throw the game, is that it?"

"Not at all. The rules are the same for everyone. But don't you think it is more fun to play a game where everyone wins?"

Ace's brow furrowed at the sound of Mack's deep chuckle. "I don't think your husband knows the meaning of sharing his wins. As a matter of fact, he becomes downright surly when he loses a hand. Why the other night—."

Ace cleared his throat. "Some things are better left unsaid in mixed company, Mack." He reached for a deck of cards and emptied the box. Stiffening, he held up a card. "What happened here?"

Mercy stepped closer, and a faint aroma of lavender teased his senses. Her blue eyes blinked. "What do you mean?"

"This deck is ruined. The corners are bent, and there are fingerprints all over the cards."

"Oh yes, I see what you mean. I made the mistake of allowing the boys to play for cookies as an incentive the last time. It was Jack's idea to bend the corners, but he only did that on the face cards."

Mack slapped his leg and laughed. "He's your kid, all right."

"I've never dealt marked cards in my life," Ace barked. "Don't you have something else to do?"

Agent Thomas rubbed his chin. "I suppose I could head over to the telegraph office to see if we have any messages."

"Do that and ask the children to come into the parlor on your way

out." Ace motioned toward the front yard.

With the slamming of the front door, a breeze from the double windows caused the lace curtains to flutter, mimicking the feeling in his heart. He rubbed his chest. "Go on and tell me about this game of yours."

"The object of the game is to match two cards and total the sum. The face cards are worth ten, and the ace is worth eleven. The first one to reach one hundred wins." Mercy arranged the cards face down in rows.

"What do they win?"

She paused. "Nothing, they just win."

"A man needs an incentive." He placed a hand on her elbow and edged closer.

"That could be disastrous." Mercy gulped. "You see what happened the last time I offered an incentive?"

"Remind me. What was the incentive again?"

"Cookies." Mercy licked her lips. "That's why your deck is ruined, remember?"

"If I'm going to play this game and carry on as though I enjoy seeing someone else win, I'll need a motivation." He circled an arm around her waist.

"What do you have in mind?" She whispered.

"Pa?" Sounds of his son's voices and Thea's squeals drew them apart. His daughter clasped her tiny hands together. "Guess what? Mr. Kitty has kittens."

Chapter 16

"How this matchmaker stays in business is beyond my way of thinking. Instead of a down-on-her-luck spinster with nowhere else to go, my wife is a vibrant, beautiful young woman intent on shaking up my life."
– Agent Ace Caldwell – Railroad Detective

The spicy aroma of ginger and clove, combined with the rich scent of cinnamon and sweet molasses, teased her senses as Mercy placed a dozen ginger cookies in a basket and covered them with a checkered cloth. "It's so nice to have the necessary ingredients to bake with. I hope you enjoy the treat as much as I enjoyed preparing it."

Ace took in a deep breath and accepted the basket of treats. "If the aroma is any indication, I'm certain we will." Her heart fluttered when their fingers brushed, and heat rushed to her cheeks.

"Miss Mercy makes good cookies, Pa. Don't worry." Thea beamed.

"She tells good stories too." David reached for a cookie.

One side of Ace's mouth lifted, displaying a dimple in his cheek. That's what I hear. I'm glad I finished my meetings this afternoon in time to join you."

"Have you found those bandits yet, Pa?" Jack's hazel eyes, so like his father's, widened.

"Not yet. We're still looking." Ace winked at his son. "These rascals keep outsmarting us. They're bound to make a mistake, and then we'll get them."

Mercy's heart melted at the sight of all three children giving their father adoring glances. Although their relationship was exasperating, it was clear he adored his children. "We're glad you are here. The children have been learning about Gideon, an unlikely hero. When we first read about him, he was threshing wheat in a winepress."

David pointed with his cookie. "He was scared because bandits were surrounding his town, and they stole their animals and ruined their crops. That sounds like the bunch of robbers you're chasing, doesn't it, Pa?"

"It sure does." Ace polished off a cookie.

Thea extended her arms wide. "While he was in his hidey-hole, an angel came and said, 'Don't worry, everything is going to be just fine.'"

"That's not what he said." David puffed out his chest. "The angel told him to quit being a yellow-belly 'cause God would help him."

Jack huffed. "Still don't know why God would pick a weakling like him."

“Gideon would agree with you. He certainly didn’t feel worthy, but he was obedient and did what God commanded.” Mercy flipped through the pages in her Bible.

“That’s why Gideon rounded up a big posse,” David added.

“It wasn’t a posse; it was an army.” Jack stacked dominos in a circle on the table, then glanced at Mercy. “How many was it again?”

“Thirty-two thousand.” Mercy nodded. “So, if each domino symbolizes one thousand, how many do you need to recreate the enemy’s army?”

“That’s easy, thirty-two.” Jack’s brow furrowed. “We only have twenty-eight dominos.”

Mercy turned her attention to Thea. “Would you fetch my sewing kit? We can use spools of thread to represent the other armies.”

“How about your tiny scissors?” Thea clasped her hands together under her chin.

“All right.” Mercy bit her lip to disguise a grin.

Ace leaned closer, speaking in a low voice. “She knows where your scissors are. Shouldn’t you keep them locked up and hidden?”

His nearness caused her stomach to flip-flop. She cast him a sideways glance. “So far, I’ve been able to keep my good ones hidden.”

“Now, are you going to tell us about the battle plan?” Jack’s voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Yes.” Mercy straightened then tapped her finger along her cheek. “But we will need something to represent Gideon’s army.”

Ace rose from his chair and retrieved a burlap sack from the pantry, emptying a pile of dried beans on the table. “If you boys will count twenty-two beans, that can represent Gideon’s army of twenty-two thousand.”

Jack nodded solemnly. “Dried beans seem fitting since Gideon was a weakling.”

Ace shot Mercy a grin, then separated a pile of beans between his two sons. “Seems to me, God already restored Gideon from that particular affliction.”

“Reckon so, since he ain’t—I mean, *isn’t*—hiding anymore.” Jack nodded solemnly. Both boys’ lips moved as they began counting.

The swinging door to the kitchen swayed open and closed on its hinge. Thea announced, “The spools of thread can be army men, and the thimble can be Gideon.” She handed the sewing basket to Mercy with a squeal. “The scissors can be his wife.”

“Women can’t be in an army!” Jack huffed.

“How come?” Thea posted both hands on her hip. “Pa says a Miss is as good as a Mister.”

“That’s not what he says.” Jack blew out his cheeks. “He says a

miss is as good as a mile."

"What does that mean, Pa?" Thea's green eyes blinked.

"It means a miss is still a miss no matter how close or far it comes to hitting its mark."

"You mean like my friend, Mark? He baits my hook."

Jack's shoulder sagged. "Never mind, but women can't go into battle 'cause they're helpless."

David flexed his muscles. "Men get to do all the fighting 'cause we're the toughest. Right, Pa?"

Mercy opened her sewing basket displaying the contents with a raised eyebrow.

Ace retrieved a thimble, a spool of thread, and her miniature scissors and positioned them on the table. "God made men to be the protector of the family, so they are physically stronger. But that doesn't mean women are defenseless." The golden flecks in his eyes disappeared, giving them the appearance of toffee. "He made women to be the perfect helpmate."

Jack rolled his eyes, then returned his attention to the makeshift army. "Now, what happens?"

David placed the last bean in front of the dominos. "Gideon's army is ready and waiting outside the bad guys' camp."

"God told Gideon to tell anyone afraid to go home." Mercy tapped the pile of beans. "Twenty-two thousand left, leaving only ten thousand."

David slapped his hand to his forehead, and Ace chuckled. Her heart lightened at the rumbles emitting from his chest.

"Told you they were yellow-bellied." Jack crossed his arms.

"There's still a lot of beans left." David motioned with his hands. "Gideon and his men can still beat 'em."

Mercy nodded. "Perhaps that is why God told Gideon there were still too many."

"Let's see what happens next." Ace reached for the Bible and scanned the page. "It says here that when the army went to the river for a drink, God told Gideon to separate the men lapping the water like dogs from those who were bowing down on their knees to drink. Three hundred men were drinking with their hand to their mouth."

Jack's mouth dropped open. "He sent three hundred soldiers home?"

"No, just the opposite. God told Gideon that he only wanted the three-hundred men to stay. The lesson is it was God's battle to win, not Gideon's. The victory would come because God was in control, and He would provide all the help the soldiers needed."

"That doesn't make sense." Jack raised an eyebrow, reminding Mercy of his father.

Her lips curved upward. “God told Gideon He would be with him, and what was left of the enemy army would be struck down as if it were one man.”

Ace helped the boys form three groups surrounding the circle made from dominos. His deep baritone voice became animated. “That night, Gideon’s army surrounded the enemy’s camp. The three hundred men carried trumpets and empty jars with torches inside.”

Mercy tapped the pitcher of milk with a wooden spoon and used her fingers to resemble a trumpet. “They blew their trumpets and yelled, ‘For the Lord and for Gideon!’ Then they smashed the jars they were carrying, holding onto the torches with one hand and the trumpet in the other hand, shouting, ‘A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!’”

“Then what happened?” David stood, upsetting his chair.

Mercy jumped, and her hand flew to her neck. “Goodness, you startled me for a moment.”

“What’s the matter? Did you think I was about to sail into Jack again?” David gave a snaggle-toothed grin.

“Don’t worry. We promised Pa the next time we got into it, me and David would settle our grievance outside.”

Ace shot Mercy a sheepish grin, then cleared his throat. “Just like the sudden noise from your chair startled Mercy, imagine how much more commotion there would be if three-hundred chairs hit the floor all at once? There were all sorts of confusion in the camp.”

Mercy circled her wooden spoon in the air. “The Midianites started running around like chickens with their heads cut off and turned on each other.”

“Ew, that’s disgusting.” Thea scrunched her nose.

Ace tapped the open Bible with his finger. “The rest of the men ran away and were captured by the men of Ephraim because Gideon sent messengers ahead of them to let them know they were coming.”

“That must have been the posse waiting, right, Pa?” David asked.

Ace chuckled. “More like an army, I imagine.” He reached for Mercy’s hand. His thumb caressed the palm of her hand. “The story of Gideon is a good reminder always to ask God for help. He will give you wisdom and strength, maybe in ways you would never imagine.”

Hands on hip, Thea inclined her chin. “But what happened to Gideon’s wife?”

“Jumpin’ Jehoshaphat, maybe Gideon didn’t have a wife.” Jack waved his arms.

“His housekeeper then, what happened to her?” Thea tugged on her brother’s sleeve.

Ace cleared his throat. “You three finish your cookies, then go

brush your teeth and get ready for bed while I help Mercy clean up the kitchen."

Chapter 17

"I used to question why Gideon would ask God for a miracle to follow his plan.
If I didn't live in Texas, I would lay a fleece on my cellar floor and ask God to cover it in dew.
I can certainly relate to Gideon and wonder if I have missed God's plan for my life."
– Miss Mercy Marigold Fairchild – Piano Teacher

After dinner, Mercy washed the dishes as Ace dried, which had become their evening ritual over the past week. Ace piled plates next to the sink. A lock of dark hair spilled across his forehead, reminding Mercy of his mischievous sons. He poured heated water into the sink.

"You surprise me a bit with your strategy on teaching the Bible. I thought I would be bored, but you make the stories come to life."

"My father was instrumental in my education, and I suppose the skills he learned at West Point find their way into my teaching style."

"Your father went to West Point? I thought he was a preacher?" The sound of his deep voice hinted with laughter.

"He always said his experience in the Mexican War was a baptism of fire and rekindled his faith. My father lost an eye and use of his left arm, so he was discharged from the army, returned to Georgia, and married my mother. Pa pastored the same rural church in South Georgia until he passed away." She washed a pan, then passed it to him. Her heart pounded as his fingers brushed hers.

"What was his role during the War between the States?"

"By the time war came, he was in his mid-fifties, so he wasn't forced to join the Confederate army. However, his role remained the same, preaching the gospel. There were few men left in the community, and the church was full of women and children. As the war progressed, it became increasingly difficult for him to protect and encourage the ones who were left." Mercy stared at the soapy water, then cleared her throat.

"If you are asking what his political views were, he was an abolitionist. Not that the opinion mattered when Sherman made his march to the sea. Everything around us was seized by the army or burned to the ground. Most of the people in our community lost their homes, livestock, and crops. The church became a temporary shelter for the next several months. Then, just when we thought things couldn't get worse, there was an outbreak of scarlet fever."

“How old were you and your sisters during this time?”

“I was sixteen, Faith was fourteen, and Grace thirteen.” Mercy lifted her chin. “My father depended on me to keep my sisters and the other children entertained. I enjoyed taking on the role of teacher. The lessons gave us something to think about other than the grumbling in our stomachs.”

“I fought for the Union and spent most of my time in Louisiana. We ate a steady diet of bread, coffee, and mosquitos.”

“There was no bread or coffee, but mosquitos, gnats, and bugs, in general, are enormous in South Georgia. I’m surprised we didn’t think to add them into the soup.” Mercy wrinkled her nose.

“I’m surprised the army didn’t make it a mandate.” He grinned, then reached for another dish.

Mercy matched his smile and felt some of the tension release from her shoulders. “Toward the end of the war, things became so grim some of the women in town became enraged and held the general store up at gunpoint. Later they broke into the railroad depot, smashed down the door with an ax, and stole a wagon filled with bacon.”

Ace whistled. “The women did all that?”

“Indeed, Daddy said they were like a dozen mama bears intent on protecting their cubs. The protective desire was apparent, but appearance-wise they resembled half-starved alley cats.” Mercy blew out her cheeks. “I held such resentment in my heart when everything of value was taken or destroyed by the northern army. But in the end, I made a similar choice. I will always feel guilty about preparing and storing the stolen food, but it seemed a life-and-death choice at the time. I couldn’t stand the idea of children going hungry another day.”

“You were trying to survive. What would have happened if you hadn’t used the supplies provided?” Ace’s deep baritone voice was soothing. “Live and learn, then move on with life. Best to keep yourself busy so as not to dwell on the past.”

“Is that what motivates you to work so many hours and travel as much as you do? Is there something you are trying to forget?”

A flush crept up his neck, then he shrugged. “I can’t erase the memories, but like you, I don’t want to repeat the same mistakes.”

“Even so, I still feel responsible and often find myself motivated by the feeling to do better, hoping to please God by making better decisions. Perhaps that is why I wanted to go into the mission field and hoping to partner with my husband in making a difference in people’s life.”

“Your pa’s experience during the Mexican War ought to make you realize the danger that lurks out west. If you ask me, it is a blessing that the dream is laid to rest. I’m certainly glad you landed here with

my family and me." Ace reached for her wet hand and rubbed it with the dishtowel. His gaze lingered on her lips.

"The idea of going into a new territory is exciting. But it's not the location that is important but the dream of partnership. My parents had a wonderful marriage and worked together through the good and bad. I desire the same thing." Mercy gulped; his gaze held her captive. "I haven't given up hope."

The evening sky shone through the window, illuminating his dark eyes. Flecks of green and brown blended, reminding her of the Spanish moss-lace trees reflecting off the black swamp water back home.

He wrapped his finger around an escaping lock of hair. "You are a lovely woman and deserve more. But the best I can offer is the plan already laid out. You will never have to worry about money, food, or shelter. But there can be no romance or talk of love. I'm not equipped for it."

"Need I remind you I never accepted your so-called 'plan,' and I refuse to remain in limbo. I came here to be your wife and accept my role to care for the children. If that is not something you can agree to, I will seek an annulment."

"Just like a woman to turn tail and run without any thought to the children." Ace stepped back, scowling

"Even though I've only been here a month, I already love the children. But they will never feel secure until my role is firm." Mercy squared her shoulders. "You see the way Jack challenges me and the way Thea cries with any sign of conflict, and poor David thinks he is my protector. The entire situation is completely unhealthy, and if anyone is fleeing, it's you."

"Look, traveling is part of my job." Ace rubbed the back of his neck.

"It's not only your absence that's the problem. You are so busy trying to rationalize things you convince yourself you can set emotions aside. Until you face the fears or past hurts that happened before we met, there can be no true partnership."

Turning on his heel, Ace began to pace. Mercy shook her head slightly. The man's actions were contradictory. One minute he was helpful, supportive, and even flirtatious. The next, his demeanor was as cold as a frog's tongue.

His boots made clip-clops across the wooden floors until pausing in front of her. "What makes you such an expert? You know nothing of my previous life."

"That would be perfectly acceptable if I were your housekeeper." Mercy crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "Need I remind you, I never agreed to accept the position."

Chapter 18

"Just when I think I'm playing my cards right, it feels like God changes the rules of the game."
–Agent Ace Caldwell – Railroad Detective

Ace unfolded a map, then flattened it across the game table in his parlor. Reaching into his pocket, he removed a dozen dried beans from his pocket and grinned. "Mercy gave me the idea of using these to mark the map."

"I like it better when she uses cookies." His brother-in-law Hiram extended his long legs under the table.

"My wife is spoiling you rotten." Ace scowled. "Maybe you should spend some time with the boys this afternoon mucking out stalls at the livery."

"No thank you. Mercy sure knows how to make a man feel welcome. She's pretty, smart, and a good cook to boot. If I were you, I'd stick closer to home." Hiram's blue-gray eyes crinkled at the corners

"So you mentioned several times."

"When are you going to quit acting like you've been played a bad hand?"

"I don't know what you're inferring." Ace avoided his brother-in-law's gaze. His thoughts on taking the next step in his marriage were both appealing and terrifying. But if he was to remain master of his emotions, he was not about to discuss his struggles with Hiram.

"Sure, you do. Just the mention of her name and your eyes light up like candles on a Christmas tree. When Mercy walks into a room, you can't take your eyes off of her. Don't you think it's time you let go of the past and started living again?"

"You're one to talk." Ace's brows furrowed at Hiram's narrowed gaze.

"Why do you think I'm such an expert on the situation?"

"How about if we get back to business?"

Hiram rubbed his red-rimmed eyes, then followed Ace's finger as it moved along the section of the map.

"The robberies occur west of here, targeting heavy payrolls from several booming mining towns. There are thousands of payroll dollars locked in their express cars."

Thea pushed the pocket door into its hiding spot with both hands. Then cupping her hands together, she yelled, "Surprise, Uncle Hiram, we made cookies."

Mercy's skirt swooshed as she entered with a tray containing cups filled with coffee. The deep plum print highlighted with tiny pink flowers made her cheeks appear rosy. Yet, despite the simple style, she was poised, graceful, and looked beautiful. "When I heard you were meeting with Ace and Mack this afternoon, I made your favorite."

"Mack, is it?" Ace sent Agent Thomas a warning glare.

"They're Hiram's favorites, but I feel certain you and Mack will enjoy them too." Mercy gave him a wide smile. He rubbed his chest. The woman was a contradiction, her golden hair and smooth skin gave her the appearance of an angel, yet the twinkling of her blue eyes and tilt of her chin gave a hint of her tenacious spirit. The sound of his brother-in-law's deep, throaty laughter interrupted his thoughts.

"See what I mean?" Hiram waggled his eyebrows.

Ace turned his attention back to the map. "As I was saying, an attempted robbery outside of Pierce, Texas, was foisted by the local sheriff and his deputy. Unfortunately, the arrest they made turned out to be members of the Holton gang, and we thought we had a bit of a reprieve."

Thea squealed. "Can I place the beans on the map?"

Ace chuckled, then positioned himself in a chair and set his daughter on his lap. Her eyebrows narrowed in concentration as he guided her tiny fingers in arranging the markers. "What is surprising is since the arrest, robbers have hit the surrounding areas within a seven to ten-mile radius twice."

Mercy passed the coffee cups, then studied the map. "Did any of the gang members escape when the arrest was made?"

"Not as far as we can tell. The descriptions from the railroad passengers and personnel don't match up to the Holton gang's previous robberies at all." Agent Thomas tapped his finger on the map. "There is a long incline between the Pierce and Roundabout stations that cause the trains to slow down to a crawl and creates the perfect opportunity for bandits to hop on board and force the engineer to stop. Following their predecessor's pattern, they uncouple the passenger cars from the engine, proceed down the track a mile, and transfer the money to their cohorts who are waiting."

"The next hit occurred in broad daylight in Roundabout." Ace guided Thea to position another bean on the map. Then speaking softly in her ear, he motioned toward her small table and chair. "Why don't you take a break and enjoy a cookie. Your doll looks like she might enjoy some company."

The rustling of Mercy's skirt and the now-familiar scent of lavender were a welcome interruption, and Thea eagerly followed his wife to the play area. His eyebrows narrowed. Not only had she not moved the table and chair set, but the area now included a bookshelf

filled with assorted puzzles, books, and toys.

His mouth lifted at the sight of assorted tin soldiers lining the shelf that once belonged to Mercy's father. Jack's and David's expressions at the gift were priceless. Both boys wrapped arms around her tiny waist, and if not for his presence, they would have knocked her to the ground. Instead, his arms locked around the three in an unexpected embrace warming his heart. He scowled, rubbing his chest. The stories his wife told of her father had endeared the man to his soul. What would her father think of Ace's treatment of his daughter? *Mercy deserves more than I can give*.

Agent Thomas's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Before the arrival of the train, a group of drunken cowboys were loitering around the station. The engineer recognized the voice and the stature of the leader from the previous holdup."

Nodding, Ace added, "Although we can't be sure it's the same person since the bandit's face was covered with a kerchief. The pattern is the same. They drove the engine and the express car away from town and unloaded the payroll."

His brother-in-law rubbed his chin. "According to the report I read, when the engineer backed the train into Pierce, he went in search of the sheriff and interrupted a game of poker. Even though he immediately rounded up a posse to search the area, they came up empty-handed."

Mercy tapped her finger to her lips and met Ace's gaze. "What about the sheriff in Roundabout? Did he turn up any clues?"

"The town is without a sheriff at the moment. Instead, they have a young deputy trained by Milton, who reportedly has a roguish reputation for bringing in fugitives draped over their saddles. He grew up in the area and knows the landscape well. The town is pleased with his performance and will probably look to hiring him on full-time."

Mercy studied the intersecting lines denoting the position of the rails and train stops. "How many miles are there between Roundabout and Pierce?"

"About seven." Ace stiffened, then met the wide eyes of Agent Thomas and Hiram.

"Then it shouldn't take long for someone to get back into town with a message. It seems as though either the sheriff and his posse or the young deputy should have come up with something."

Hiram reached for another cookie. "Might be something to consider. Of course, it wouldn't be the first time a sheriff and his deputies worked both sides of the law."

"We've known Sheriff Milton for years. His reputation is stellar." Ace pulled on his ear. "But maybe we were too hasty in accepting his report. It wouldn't hurt to go back and take a second look."

Chapter 19

"Your name follows you the rest of your life. If you don't like the one your parents gave you, change it."
–Agent Ace Caldwell – Railroad Detective

The following evening, Mercy stood in the billiard room with the children and Ace. She bit her lip as she curved her index finger on top of the stick and rested her thumb on the bottom, then aimed. The cue ball missed her target, rolling into the corner pocket. "I just can't seem to get the hang of this game."

"At least the ball didn't fly across the room this time." David patted her forearm.

Ace chuckled. "Good thing my reflexes are still quick, or it would have hit me square in the head."

Mercy's cheeks flamed, but she matched his grin. He'd rolled his white dress shirt above his elbows, and a lock of dark hair the color of midnight spilled across his forehead. Stubble shadowed his square jaw —he was the polar opposite of the husband she anticipated and the most handsome man she'd ever seen.

"When Mr. Kitty's babies are bigger, she can help. She's a good swatter." Thea rolled a ball with her hand, sending the remaining orbs spinning across the table.

"That's cheating." Jack slapped his hand across his forehead.

Ace placed his stick back into its holder, then removed his pocket watch. "I need to be on the nine o'clock train. Let's call the game a draw."

"When are you going to be back, Pa?" David's lower lip puckered.

"I shouldn't be gone long this time, son." Ace patted the boy's shoulders. "You three go get ready for bed, and we'll be by in a few minutes to hear your prayers."

The sound of the pocket doors clicked, and shuffles from small, booted feet shuffled across the wooden floors. Mercy fixed her gaze on Ace as he edged closer. He placed his hand on her waist and positioned her back to his chest. His voice tickled her neck. "You seem to be having problems aligning your shot line. I believe you require some tutoring."

Mercy gulped. "Unless you intend to take your life in your own hands every time we play, I feel certain you are correct."

"Seems fitting since every moment we spend together puts me in a bit of a panic. Try resting the stick on top of your index finger this time. When taking aim, make sure your chin is aligning with your cue

stick." Ace guided her shot. "Now try again for the striped one in the corner pocket."

Her stick wobbled, and the cue bounced twice, then off the table. She let out a heavy sigh, and Ace leaned over her positioning the cue. Her mouth lifted from the rumbling emitting from his chest. "You just need a bit more practice. Let's try again."

"I can't concentrate when you're this close," she whispered.

Ace straightened, then placed a hand on Mercy's waist, turning her toward him. For a moment, time stood still, neither of them saying anything. Finally, his hands cupped her cheeks, and then his mouth caressed hers. The warmth of his kiss enveloped her heart.

He pulled back, then laid her hand against his chest. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about you and me. Even though I know I'm not the man you were expecting. When I return, I want things to be different between us."

"You and the children are in no way a disappointment, just different from what I was expecting." Mercy bit her lip. "God's plans are often different and even greater than our own. But I am sorry that I am not what you were anticipating."

Ace looked heavenward. "I am ashamed to say my request was for a down-on-her-luck spinster with nowhere else to go. I sure wasn't anticipating a young, vibrant, beautiful woman intent on shaking up my life."

"You think I'm beautiful?"

"Extraordinarily." Ace wrapped a finger around an escaping curl caressing her neck.

She gulped. "As for shaking things up, your home life was already topsy-turvy when I arrived."

One side of Ace's mouth lifted. "You made my game room into a playroom."

"You already have a billiard room. I simply added a few odds and ends for the children in the parlor." Mercy lifted her chin. "I thought you said you liked the changes."

"They're growing on me." Ace wrapped his arms around her waist.

"I still shudder when I look at the wallpaper. I can't abide looking at repeated patterns containing a woman's head with snakes in place of hair." Mercy scrunched her nose.

"I find Medusa fascinating. My second choice was a pattern that featured Aphrodite. You reminded me of her when you first came with your hair blowing all around you, encircling you like a robe." He removed the pins from her hair and smoothed it across her shoulders. His voice was rough. "I want to be the husband you deserve. Can you be content with a man who will forever be falling short of your expectations?"

Her body warmed from the tips of her toes to the roots of her hair. She avoided his gaze and fiddled with the button on his shirt. “Before my father sent the last correspondence to the matchmaker, he shared with me his desire for her to be the same sort of representative that Abraham used to find a bride for his son Isaac. We prayed fervently that Mrs. Sinclair would lead my sisters and me to the men God intended.” She lifted her chin. “My expectations are uncomplicated. I want the words we spoke in our marriage vows to be true—We will choose to love, honor, and cherish one another until we part in death.”

“You make it sound simple. I know it can’t be easy to live with a man like me.”

“Unlike me, who is quiet, reserved, and inconspicuous?” Mercy gave an impish grin.

One side of his mouth lifted. “I don’t know who you are talking about. The woman I married is stubborn, persistent, and downright obstinate at times. She is also intelligent, kind, patient, and just the thought of her keeps me awake most nights.”

Mercy stared at the tips of her shiny new boots. Another reminder of her husband’s attempts to meet her needs and make her comfortable. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want a bit of romance. But the true foundation of love is in the actions of caring for one another. I have faith that if we put forth the effort, we can find our way.”

“I like the sound of that.” Ace waggled his eyebrows and leaned closer. His breath teased her senses. “Speaking of action, before we share another kiss, we have some unfinished business to discuss.”

“We do?”

Ace reached into his pocket and retrieved a velvet-covered box. “The day we married, you took a dislike to my signet ring, and rightly so. But I don’t like the idea of my wife not wearing a token of my affection. I’m hoping you will wear this one instead.” He removed a golden band.

“How lovely.” Mercy gasped.

“I, Ace, take you, Mercy, to have and to hold from this day forward to love, honor, and cherish as long as we both shall live.” He slipped the ring on her finger, then brought it to his lips.

“Just two things are missing to make this situation perfect.” Mercy gave a watery smile.

Ace stiffened. “I suppose a diamond is one?”

“A diamond?” Mercy rubbed the pad of her thumb across his third finger. “I thought your signet ring was flashy. I’ve never seen a man wear a diamond wedding band.”

“I’m not talking about a diamond for me.” Ace pinched the bridge of his nose. “But I don’t need a wedding ring.”

Mercy huffed. “I thought you said you wanted to commit to our marriage?”

His eyebrows shot upward. “How about if I have my signet ring sized for that finger?”

Mercy crossed her arms. “My parents wore matching bands. I would like the same.”

“You sure are stubborn.” Ace retrieved her fingers, then entwined them with his. “All right, you win, as long as I don’t have to wear the thing in my nose. You said two things. What’s the other?”

“I did? I told you when you stand so close, I can’t think.” She swallowed. “Oh yes, I remember. In any legal agreement, one shouldn’t use a nickname, or it doesn’t count.”

“Who says? I never use my given name for anything.”

“The pastor used it when we married.”

“He’s lucky I didn’t punch him in the mouth too. I didn’t know the man knew my given name.” His hazel eyes crinkled at the corners.

“It was on the marriage certificate.” Mercy let out a contented sigh. “Horace Ebenezer Caldwell. I love the name Ebenezer. It’s from the book of Samuel, and it means rock or stone of help. If we have a son, I’d like to use the name and call him Eb.”

“Absolutely not.” Ace shuddered.

Mercy poked out her lip. “I refuse to have any more children named after cards.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself, aren’t you?” Ace waggled his eyebrows and brought Mercy into a full embrace. “I will promise you this. Once I complete the investigation on this latest robbery, I’m resigning my position as a railroad detective. The way I figure it, I’ll have a lot better chance growing old beside my new bride if I give up the vocation.”

Chapter 20

"*Trust is easy when you cut the deck.*"
–Agent Ace Caldwell – Railroad Detective

Ace positioned himself on the back of his brother-in-law's desk and pointed toward the man behind bars. "After Agent Thomas did a bit more investigating, he turned up another witness. It seems on the evening of the ninth, when Deputy Blake and his staff were enjoying a game of poker, they employed a porter to keep the drinks coming."

"So what? That don't mean nothing." The young man in a checkered shirt and dark vest scowled from behind the iron bars.

"Normally, I would agree with you." Ace walked over to the pot-bellied stove, poured himself a coffee, then turned his attention to Hiram. "According to the porter, our friend, the deputy here, paid him extra to tell folks they were carrying on a serious game of cards and didn't want to be disturbed. When the train pulled into the station, they exited out the window, mounted their horses, and headed for the stakeout. The robbery went smoothly, and by the time the engineer backed the train into Roundabout, the deputy and his gang were sitting as pretty as you please in the back room of the saloon."

"That's a clever scheme if ever I heard one." Hiram leaned back in his chair and whistled.

"Exactly, which is why you should know I didn't have any part in it. I'm not smart enough to come up with a scheme like that." The deputy slapped his hat against his leg.

The shrill sound of the train's whistle rang out, and Hiram followed Ace outside the jailhouse. The morning sun reflected on the tin star on his brother-in-law's vest. "What gave them way?"

"Other than the porter's testimony, nothing until one of Milton's deputy's started flashing a lot of money around. When questioned by the marshal, he became a little nervous and said he won it all in a poker game. According to the informant, there's to be another game at noon in Pierce hosted by one of Sheriff Milton's deputies."

"I still can't believe Sheriff Milton would be playing both sides of the law like this. Bold as brass to try something like this in broad daylight."

"I agree he is about the last man in the world I would figure to do something like this. Hopefully, I'm wrong."

Hiram's hand rested on his six-shooter, safely tucked in a double-loop holster over his right hip. "What do you need from me?"

"The marshal is sending over some reinforcements to help you

keep things secure here." Ace inclined his head toward the sandstone jailhouse.

"I ought to be able to handle one bandit." Hiram scowled. "The kid is still wet behind the ears."

"We believe there are two groups, one in Pierce and the other in Roundabout. Either way, according to the informer, Deputy Blake hid most of the money. Depending on how much money is at stake, they may send someone to cause trouble and break him out."

"According to the report I read, there was no payroll on board the train they robbed. So there might not be anything to worry about, but I'm glad to have the extra help just in case." Hiram's eyebrows narrowed. "But what about you?"

"Mack and I will team up, and I have support coming from other railroad police. The sooner we lock up these bandits, the better it will be for everyone." Ace removed an envelope from his vest pocket. "If anything happens to me, you'll look after Mercy and the kids for me, won't you?"

"You know I will." Hiram's Adam's apple bobbed. "But no point thinking like that. Keep a cool head, follow your instincts, and you'll be fine."

"I'll feel better knowing you're here. Mercy does a good job with the kids." Ace nodded toward the livery and stable yard. "Her tutoring the blacksmith's son along with my boys was a stroke of genius. I can see a huge improvement in their reading skills already."

Hiram patted his shoulder roughly. "Once Jack sees she's here to stay, he'll come around. Right now, she's just another woman he is keeping at arm's length. He's a lot like his pa in that respect. It takes him a while to make up his mind, but eventually, he'll make the right decision."

Ace ran his fingers through his hair. "Don't rub it in. I wish now that I'd done what you suggested a year ago and given up my work with the railroad and focused on the mill. Then I wouldn't be in this mess."

"Don't do anything stupid. I'd hate to have to hire on an extra deputy just to help look after your three kids and beautiful, rich widow."

"Very funny." The engineer activated two long whistles with the pull cord, and clouds of steam and fire shot up from the engine. Ace repositioned his hat and winked. "Wish me luck."

Ace took in a deep breath. The stench left by the previous occupants of the express car was thick and putrid. Crates of various sizes, baggage, and dozens of bales of hay lined the walls.

Agent Thomas extended his arms. "The entire width of the compartment is less than ten feet. I'm starting to feel like the walls are

closing in on me."

Ace chuckled. "We've only been traveling for an hour. It must be the odor from the livestock that's getting to you."

"Knowing the number of gold bullions in those safes is what's making my knees knock." Mack lifted a crate, moved it to the corner in front of a window, and settled on his newly created perch.

"If our tip is correct, there will be three members of the Pierce gang loitering around the station. When the train comes to a stop, if they try to enter the car, we'll give them an unexpected greeting."

The brakes squealed and hissed. The sight of the train station came into view, and Ace scanned the crowded platform. "There they are, far left. Hold steady and wait for them to approach the door." Ace took in a deep breath and raised his Winchester to his shoulder. Although his six-shooter hung at his hip, the repeating rifle was a better choice for this job. He called out, "Remember, take your time so we will have the advantage of the element of surprise."

Chapter 21

"*Just because trouble comes visiting doesn't mean you should offer it a place at the dinner table*."
–Jack Caldwell – Age eight

"Boys, you've made such progress with your studies today. If you'd like, I have a picnic basket ready, and you can take it with you to the fishing hole." Mercy returned her teacher's copy of the *McGuffey Readers Step-by-Step Primer* to the bookshelf.

"No fooling?" Jack's eyebrows furrowed.

"You'd think the young man who got one hundred percent of his vocabulary words correct this morning would be a little less surprised to be rewarded for his hard work. So put your books away and join me in the kitchen." Mercy placed her finger to her lips. "Your sister is taking a nap, but I convinced her to stay at home with me and make cookies. So there will be no chance of you luring her away with temptations of baiting your hooks."

"Thank goodness…I mean, that's fine, ma'am." The blacksmith's son, Mark, grinned.

"When we arrive home, I'll tell Thea her cookies are delicious no matter how bad they taste." David nodded soberly.

"Excellent idea, but don't worry. I'll help your sister every step of the way." Mercy ruffled the young boy's hair. "I'll meet you three back in the kitchen."

A thud followed by a quick knock sounded. Mercy's skirts swished as she made her way to the front door to find a tall, bearded man wearing a tin star on his vest. "Good Morning, ma'am. I'm Sheriff Milton, and I'm looking for Detective Caldwell."

Mercy placed her hand on the door and glanced over her shoulder towards the children placing their school items on the bookshelf in the parlor. Her throat felt dry, and a kaleidoscope of butterflies erupted in her stomach. *What did Ace say about this man*? *Is he friend or foe*?

The distinct aroma of whiskey, mud, sweat, and blood emitted from his presence. Mercy sucked in a breath. For a moment, she was transported back to the brutal summer when the church became a makeshift hospital. Thick swarms of black flies and mosquitos tormented the poor men and attendants. Blood flowed into a tub catching arms and legs—the floor littered with piles of dirty rags… She shook her head, clearing her thoughts. "My husband isn't home at the moment, Sheriff."

"Your husband, is it?" The sheriff's eyes widened, lingering on her torso. "I'll wait." He pushed open the door and stepped into the parlor. His hand resting on his six-shooter, he called, "Morning, boys.

How come you fellows aren't in school?"

"Morning, Sheriff. We do all our schooling here. Our stepmother teaches us." David puffed out his chest.

"Well, isn't that something?" The sheriff rubbed his chin.

"Would you like some coffee and maybe a sandwich, Sheriff?"

"Don't mind if I do." Sheriff Milton's boots made clip-clunks across the floor as he followed her into the kitchen.

The boys followed. "We're getting ready to go fishing." David stood on tiptoe and peered into the basket.

"I'm afraid you're going to have to put off your fishing trip today, boys." The sheriff closed the windows, then pulled the shades closed. "You see, some bad fellows are running loose, and it wouldn't be safe."

"You're scaring the children, Sheriff." Mercy felt perspiration roll down her back.

"We can't have that, can we, Mrs. Caldwell?" The sheriff's eyes narrowed, and he removed his six-shooter from its resting place on his hip. "So as long as you cooperate with me, they have nothing to fear."

Mercy lifted her chin. "Do you mind if I feed them their lunch?"

"Sure, sure." He waved his gun back and forth. "Pour me some coffee while you're at it. It's been a long night."

"Boys, go ahead and sit down. Everything is going to be fine." Mercy straightened her shoulders, hoping her voice sounded more confident than she felt. Then, squeezing her eyes shut, she prayed a quick prayer for guidance and began to unpack the basket. She distributed the sandwiches and pickles and watched while the man peered out the window behind the shade.

"You'll be able to hear the buggy when he drives up. Your sandwich and coffee are ready."

"Whatcha being nice to him for? Are you stupid or something?" Jack adopted a scowl.

Mercy cleared her throat and pressed her lips into a thin line. "A lifetime of instruction of good manners doesn't go away simply because there's a bandit in the house."

"Sure like the way you talk, woman. A real Southern belle, aren't ya." The sheriff slapped his leg and laughed, then winced. He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a brown flask, and turned up the contents. Smacking his lips, he pointed his gun toward Jack. "Do like your ma says and mind your manners, boy."

"She's not my ma." Jack's fist opened and closed.

Mercy poured coffee, then reached for a pitcher of milk and filled the boys' cups. Glancing at the sheriff, she noticed a dark patch forming on the back of his vest shirt. Her eyes wandered to the man's weathered face. Was it her imagination, or did his eyes seem to be

drooping?

Sweat broke out across her chest. Her skirts swished as she circled the table, pausing slightly behind the sheriff. She tapped her wooden spoon on the pitcher, and three pairs of eyes widened. “Boys, it’s time for the blessing. Please bow your head, and remember—with God, nothing is impossible.” Sucking in a deep breath, she swung the pitcher as hard as she could toward the sheriff’s head. Somewhere in the background, she heard David’s voice yelling, “For the Lord and for Gideon.” Followed by sounds of tin cups and plates clattering across the wooden floors.

Scrambling to her feet, she flung herself on top of the sheriff and removed his gun. “Jack, bolt all the doors. We don’t know if the man was traveling by himself. David, please go into the cellar and find something to tie the man up with.”

“I don’t think you’re going to need that, ma’am. I believe you done killed him.” Mark’s brown eyes appeared huge in his thin face.

“Of course, I haven’t killed him. Or at least I don’t think I have.” Mercy pointed the gun toward the sheriff with one hand and lifted the shade with a snap with the other. “On second thought, boys, do you think you could sneak out through the basement door and run as fast as you can to the mill and summon help?”

“Sure, we’re good at sneaking. It won’t take no time to reach the mill’s bridge.” David leaped onto the window seat and pointed out the double window toward the mill.

Jack appeared next to Mercy, his brow furrowed. “I’d better stay here with you. One of our plates must have hit you ’cause your head’s bleeding, and your hands are shaking. I’ll go find some rope.”

Mercy felt her heart melt at the surprising chivalry from her adversary. She wrapped one arm around his shoulder while still keeping her gaze fixed on the sheriff. “Thank you, son, but as fast as you boys can run, you can reach the mill almost as fast as you can go down the cellar steps.”

“Let’s go, men,” David let out a yell, and Jack and Mark swung open the door and bolted down the stairs.

“Be careful.” Mercy leaned against the counter, her hands outstretched and shaking as she held the gun toward the bandit. “Lord help, I don’t want the man to be dead. But please don’t let him wake up until he’s tied up, out of this house, and not before Thea wakes up.”

“You say he’s lost a lot of blood?” Sitting in the parlor on the velvet settee, Mercy removed the cool compress from her eye and stared into the doctor’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Doctor, I’m having a hard

time processing what you're telling me. Are you talking about Sheriff Milton, the man who is lying on the floor of my kitchen?"

"Him, oh he will be fine—just a flesh wound and a concussion. Of course, he's not on your floor anymore. He's locked up at the jailhouse." The doctor's shaggy gray eyebrows drew together as one. "I gave you a little something before I put the stitches in. It took four. Between that and the shock of the day, you have a right to be rattled."

"Yes, I suppose so." Mercy took in a deep breath, then clenched and released her fists. "Although, to be honest, ever since the war, I've had a hard time dealing with blood. Even thinking about it can give me the feeling of lightheadedness."

"Based on the events of the day, I'm surprised you handled things as well as you did."

The sounds of tiny boots and Thea's squeals interrupted her thoughts. "Wait, Mr. Doctor, Uncle Hiram says he still needs to talk to you." Thea settled herself next to Mercy and placed two fingers together. "The doctor has tiny little scissors and a needle, too. He doesn't use thread to sew you up with, though."

"Thank you, sweetie, but don't tell me anything else." Mercy replaced the cold compress over her face.

The doctor chuckled. "When was the last time you ate?"

"I had breakfast this morning." Mercy squared her shoulders. "I'll be all right if we can change the subject."

The doctor closed his medical bag with a snap. "As I was saying, according to the telegram, your husband received a gunshot wound to the shoulder. He is a strong, healthy man, and depending on whether or not he lost a lot of … well, you know." The doctor patted her hand. "Rest and water to drink, maybe some broth, depending on how he's feeling, should put him to rights soon enough. Of course, there's always the danger of fever with gunshot wounds."

Mercy felt her knees grow weak, and the room darkened.

"Mrs. Caldwell, maybe you'd best put your head between your knees again."

Chapter 22

"As much as I would like to plan my life, God has a way of surprising me with unexpected blessings that make me happier than I ever imagined."
~Mrs. Horace Ebenezer Caldwell- Wife, Mother, and Church Pianist

Standing in front of his four-poster bed, Ace stared at his wife. She looked so tiny and frail, her bare arms resting on top of the patterned quilt. His mouth twitched, surprised that he didn't mind there was no longer a hint of red or bold color in the room. Instead, he was suddenly thankful that his daughter had taken the scissors to his former bedspread and not the one prized possession his wife brought with her from Georgia. He tiptoed closer, and his brow narrowed at the purple bruise forming on her cheek and encircling her eye.

"It's a beauty, isn't it, Pa? She got caught in the crossfire when we were slinging our plates and cups at the sheriff," David whispered.

Ace rubbed his son's head and nodded, unable to speak.

Jack motioned with his thumb and grinned. "You should have seen her, Pa. Our new ma sure is something. She smacked Sheriff Milton in the head with as much force as a bare-knuckle boxer."

Ace's heart lightened at his oldest son's pronounced shift in accepting Mercy into the household. His eyes were bright, then as if catching himself, he adopted the familiar scowl. "She has been a sight since, though. Uncle Hiram said the doctor gave her something to make her nap." Mercy thrashed and muttered something in her sleep. Her blond eyelashes fluttered against her pale cheeks.

"I reckon she has a right to be worked up. You would have been proud of her."

A lump formed in his throat; Ace swallowed hard then pressed a kiss on top of both boys' heads. "I'm proud of both of you and the way you pitched in and fought off the sheriff and then went and got help."

"Mercy said she thought whatever he was drinking out of his little brown bottle gave us the edge." David puffed out his chest. "But we ran real fast and got to the mill. Then Mr. Adams sent us to get Mark's pa. Mr. Bo helped too. He and the men from his ranch surrounded the place until Uncle Hiram said everything was fine."

Ace knelt beside his two sons. "I love you boys and want you to know that I'm planning on being around a whole lot more often. Tomorrow I want to hear all about it, but right now, how about you boys get ready for bed and tell your sister to do the same? I want to sit with Mercy for a while."

Ace cringed when the door hinge squeaked at the boys' exit. Then

slowly, he positioned himself on the side of his bed. Despite his efforts, his wife sprang forward, her blue eyes flashing. She looked like an avenging angel in her white gown with her golden hair spilling across her shoulders and down to her waist. “Steady now, soldier.” Ace grinned. “If you had a sword in your hand, I would swear you were the angel Gabriel coming to charge the enemy.”

“Some angel I would make.” Mercy threw her arms open, pressing kisses to his neck, jaw, and lips. He groaned, then repositioned his sling.

“That’s quite a welcome. Maybe I should visit my bedroom more often.”

His wife sprang to her knees. “Oh my goodness, your shoulder. I almost forgot.” She placed her hand on the sling. “The doctor told me you were wounded. Let me help you.”

“I’m fine.” Ace pulled her toward his uninjured side and placed her on his lap, relishing in the feeling of the warmth and softness of her body. He stroked her back. “I’ve had a lot worse than this. Besides, if I need help, I’ll look elsewhere. I can’t have you passing out again. Your reputation as a mighty warrior is stellar but not so good if there’s a wound to tend.”

Mercy placed her finger to his lips. “Guilty as charged, at least when it comes to…well, let’s not talk about that.” Her blue eyes were misty.

“I’m sorry Milton tried to use you and the children to gain his freedom. Because of my position with the railroad, he meant to hold my family as a ransom to give him safe passage out of the state. My job with the railroad police will never put you in harm’s way again. I resigned this afternoon.”

“Is it selfish for me to be happy when you are giving up something you love?” Mercy shivered. “But I am grateful for the news. When the doctor told me you were wounded, I was scared I was going to lose you.”

“Not a chance.” Ace cleared his throat. “I’m a gambler by nature except when it comes to matters of the heart. But no more. Starting today, I’m trusting my instincts and taking a leap of faith. I love you, sweetheart, and I want to live long enough to show you just how much. But a word of warning, I plan on us living a very long time.”

“Guess our matchmaker really does know what she is doing.” She smiled, displaying twin dimples framing full lips, once again causing his heart to pound against his chest. “Because I love you too, Horace.”

Ace chuckled. “I hate to admit it, but the way you exaggerate the syllables of my name makes my heart race. So, I’ll let you get away with calling me that on one condition.”

Mercy leaned closer, pressing her lips close to his, and whispered,

“What’s the condition?”

“As long as we’re behind closed doors.” There was no need for more discussion.

Thank you for reading. If you enjoyed this story, I hope you will check out the next book in the series Skip’s Stubborn Bride.

Check out the entire series!

Here

Also, **please join our series reader group**: https://www.facebook.com/groups/3021432914636222/ Joining gives you information on the series as well as when each book will be released. We also plan on some fun posts, too.

~o0o~

Other Books by Kimberly Grist

Heaven Inspired Matrimonial Match Collection



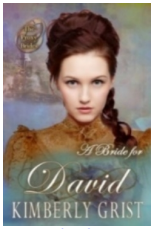
A Fresh Start for Christmas

Memphis Rose Griffin loves teaching at Counting Stars Children's Home. The girls and staff are like family, and working here ties her to her mother, whose last wish was for Memphis to take her place as teacher. But something's missing. Now at the age of twenty-eight, her teenage dream of having her own family has all but faded.

Until her pastor and the orphanage founder come with a proposal that will change her life forever. Should she become their first candidate for their new matchmaking venture? Though grim, at least her life at the orphanage is familiar and certain. Can she risk an unknown future with a man she's never met?

The last thing thirty-three-year-old Mike Montgomery wants is to marry again, especially to someone he's never met. His family has other plans for him and completes the application without his permission--even changing some of his preferences to make him seem more intriguing. Can two star-crossed candidates dare to dream again?

~o0o~



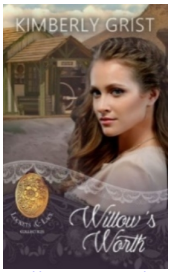
A Bride for David

Mathematics teacher Daisy Murphy agrees to participate in a new matchmaking service organized by her pastor and the matron of the orphanage where she has spent the last fifteen years. Romantic, yet practical, she's systematically eliminated all candidates but one and anticipates getting to know him better through months of correspondence.

Time is not on the side of David Taylor. He has a nephew and niece to think about, and his attorney has warned him he will lose custody of both to their wealthy grandfather if he doesn't have a wife.

A teacher longing for security, a businessman about to lose the only family he has, and a proxy marriage that can give them both exactly what they need.

~o0o~



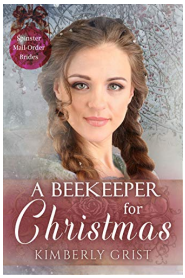
Willow's Worth

Telegraph operator, Willow Graham, has benefited from a unique lifestyle growing up on her grandfather's ranch. She loves the wide-open countryside, where she rides and trains animals. With her twenty-first birthday approaching, her family pressures her to return to the city and take up the lavish lifestyle her uncle has planned for her. But another option piques her curiosity –a matchmaking agency's recommendation that she begin correspondence with a handsome farmer.

Hardworking, twenty-seven-year-old Leo Weaver is a man of many talents. He's helped his father develop a successful farm. Loyal to Carrie town, he volunteers as a deputy sheriff. But handsome and charming, Leo's become the target of several well-meaning ladies in the community who have submitted his name for a new matchmaking venture.

Willow craves the outdoors. Leo loves community life and wants to live in town. Can a matchmaking agency really help two independent people realize the opposing desires of their hearts?

~o0o~



A Beekeeper for Christmas

She’s whimsical and fun-loving. He’s gruff and likes to keep things simple. Has the matchmaking agency made an error in judgment? Can affection soften two stubborn, opinionated individuals forging a relationship of the romantic kind?

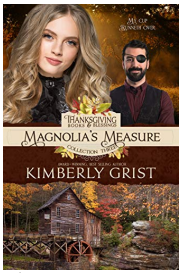
Bethany Phoebe Brady loves assisting her grandfather with his bee farm and volunteering at the Counting Stars Children's Home. A tall woman, she’s always felt awkward and unattractive, and now at the age of twenty-seven, she’s given up on the dream of a family of her own.

Until her grandfather and the orphanage founder come with a proposal that will change her life forever. Should she take a chance and turn her future over to the new matchmaking venture? Is her desire to have a family of her own, enough to risk a future with a man she's never met?

Encouraged by his brother’s success with his mail-order bride, twenty-nine-year-old, Moses Montgomery is ready to take a chance. After all, he orders things from a catalog all the time. Why not a wife? She should be sensible and take an interest in his business at the livery stable.

~o0o~

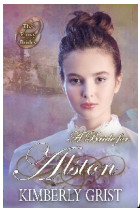
Magnolia's Measure



Choosing to participate with a matrimonial agency as a mail-order bride, Magnolia proceeds methodically and uses her skills as a cook to create the perfect recipe for a husband.

A successful businessman, the idea of putting another person's needs in front of his own is foreign. Jay's shocked when he finds himself drawn to a young woman who is a cook at an orphanage. Will Magnolia execute a foolproof method to find her ideal match? Can Jay live up to her expectations?

~o0o~



A Bride For Alston

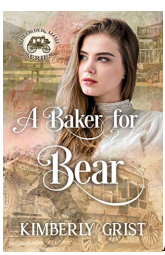
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A potter in need of a home, a businessman thirsty for the inheritance his marriage will bring, and a proxy marriage that will mold and reshape them both.

Since her parents' death, Elly Emerson handles the household and the pottery business to help support the family farm. Left out of the will Elly is faced with homelessness when her new sister-in-law makes it challenging to remain in the family home.

Alston Pike, Engineer, and Millwright believes hard work is the cure to mend a broken heart. Enticed by his grandmother's offer to fund his new project, he agrees to marry within three months.
Is Elly trading one lion's den for another?

Will Alston's business-minded approach to marriage leave him wanting more?



A Baker for Bear

https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B08PDVSNKG/

A debutante baker with a stammer. A compulsive widowed blacksmith with two young daughters. Will they find a way to coexist or, even better, forge a romantic relationship? Ada Pike longs to leave the life of a socialite and use her skills as a baker to love and nurture a family. A move to the country will perfectly suit her first steps into life on her own. Barrett Montgomery rejects the idea of a mail-order bride. What he needs is a housekeeper—someone he can fire if things don’t work out the way he likes. Can a matchmaking agency work miracles to bring two people with opposing goals together?

~o0o~



Shoo-Fly Pie By Selah

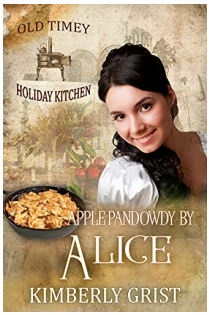
https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B09645C3MP

Can his mail-order bride handle the diversity that comes with her husband’s dangerous vocation? Together will they blend their opposing desires to create a recipe for love?

Selah Anderson agrees to participate in a matchmaking service organized by her pastor and the orphanage's matron, where she spent most of her life and become a mail-order bride. The man of her dreams will share her love of creating delicious confections and running a successful bakery. People will come for miles to purchase her specialty-shoo-fly pie.

Stagecoach driver Emerson Clark isn’t looking for love. But he knows life is better with a partner by your side- like a good team of horses supporting one another around the ruts in the road and along the narrow paths. So as long as she’s practical, he’ll be happy.

Coming Soon- Book 8 – Nov 8 – Apple Pandowdy by Alice



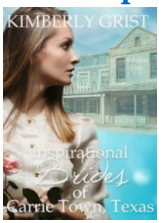
Alice Connelly agrees to participate in a new matchmaking project organized by her pastor and the orphanage's matron. She can find no peace accepting a role as a mail-order bride and instead becomes the first volunteer to accept a job in a local restaurant and relocate to Carrie Town, Texas.

She hopes the experience will help her to discover what she wants in life. But in a town where single men outnumber women thirty to one, she’s more confused than ever. Determined to put her skills as a baker to use, she plans a holiday dinner for the diner featuring a crowd-pleasing deep-dished spiced apple dessert.

Can an itinerant mail-order bride find her recipe for her happily ever after?

~o0o~

The Inspirational Brides of Carrie Town, Texas – Volume 1



Now available in a boxed set

Inspirational Brides of Carrie Town Texas Volume I

Rebecca's Hope - Fans of western historical romance will enjoy this beautiful story set in the late 19th-century of love and forgiveness. As Rebecca's unfortunate childhood circumstances unfold, we discover a heroine who is both resilient and kind. Rebecca and Sam's love story will have readers rooting for their happy ending.

Emma's Dream is a continuation of this tale told from Emma's perspective. While other young women in the late nineteenth century are reading about proper housekeeping, Emma studies herd improvement. Her dream is to implement plans for the ranch's profitability. Unfortunately, things are not running in her favor. Emma's story is one of a love that's tested by distance and has the perfect combination of history, humor, and romance with an emphasis on faith, friends, and good clean fun!

Boxed set also available in paperback https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08DT1FTFC

~o0o~

The Inspirational Brides of Carrie Town, Texas – Volume 2



The Inspirational Brides of Carrie Town Texas – Volume 2

LOIS'S RISK -Lois Weaver has been schooled to be polite lady-like, honest, to clean, cook and sew, so at the proper age, she would marry. She risked everything to open a dress shop. Now the handsome bank owner has come calling. So why isn't she happy? And why can't she forget about a certain farmer with big brown eyes?

MAGGIE'S STRENGTH – As a blacksmith, Maggie ignores her mother's pleas to dress more appropriately. Until a recent graduate of medical school returns to town. Maggie draws on unrelenting strength where iron sharpens iron—a lesson straight from the blacksmith's shop—forging an unexpected result of the romantic kind.

CAROL'S CHOICE- Leaving her lifestyle of shopping, lavish parties, and holiday endeavors for a simpler life is a temporary solution until she can make a match of her own design. Carol struggles to let go of the past, embrace the present, and hope for a better future. Will love conquer lavish?

~o0o~

The Inspirational Brides of Carrie Town, Texas – Volume 3



https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B08SR9LRLX/

GARNET'S GIFT

Twenty-two-year-old Garnet Adams longs to marry and have a houseful of children. Forced to support her widowed mother, she embraces her role as a teacher, although the Carrie Town board of education's rules for female teachers leave no opportunity for a social life.

Tall, bearded, and rough around the edges, Deputy Noah Scott would rather hunt than socialize. Garnet thinks he's a rude, insensitive drifter, and Noah's sure the last person he'd want to court is a schoolmarm--especially with her unladylike sneeze. As her students' needs bring them together, opposites seem to attract until a certain Christmas present derails their future.

MAUDE'S MISSION

After Isabelle's father's death, the last few years have been difficult for Izzy and her family. Employment for women in the late nineteenth century is limited, so her job as a waitress is a godsend. Bart Ogletree, a successful businessman new to Carrie Town, Texas, is intrigued by the lovely waitress at the local diner. Isabelle Miller is hard-working, with a ready smile for everyone but him.

And then there's Maude. God has sent a lovable but slightly awkward angel to the rescue. Her mission is to find two worthy souls to bring together. Will the difference in social backgrounds and a certain family member's prejudice be too much for this clever-but-clumsy angel?

VICTORIA'S VALUE

Opposites attract, but does this former debutante have what it takes to be wife, mother, and live on a ranch? Can a controlling cowboy who is more concerned with his axle than his wedding find a way to steer a courtship in the right direction?

This couple brings a whole new meaning to the adage that opposites attract. Does this cultured beauty have what it takes to be a rancher's wife? Will Gabe find a way to steer this courtship in the right direction?

~o0o~



A Promised Land
Can she trust him? Or is his real attraction the property and water rights he needs, and she has inherited?

Twenty-year-old Meriwether Walker enjoys the challenge of teaching her varied group of students in the one-room schoolhouse. What she doesn't like is the nomadic lifestyle that comes with it as she rotates boarding with families in the community on a month-to-month basis. Meriwether longs for a home of her own, but since single female teachers must follow so many rules, she doesn't see any end to her plight—until the letter from the attorney handling her uncle's estate arrives.

When Meriwether discovers her uncle left her his ranch, the one she loved to visit when she was a child, she quits her job and moves without hesitation to Trickling Springs, Texas, to take over her property. But when she arrives, deed in hand, she discovers her decision has put her at odds with Jake Harrison, the man who rents property from her uncle and seeks to buy the land and water rights for his cattle. They butt heads, tempers flare, but Meriwether stands her ground. Yet she can't deny the romantic sparks that fly, and she can tell it's mutual. When he comes courting, can she trust Jake Harrison, or is his real attraction the property and the water rights he needs, and she has inherited?

About the Author

Kimberly Grist is married to her high school sweetheart, Nelson. She and her husband have three adult sons, one with Down syndrome, and they have a passion for encouraging others with family members with special needs.

Kim has enjoyed writing since she was a young girl, however, began writing her first novel in 2017. Inspired by so many things in life, including her oldest son's cancer diagnosis, she finds it especially gratifying to write a happy ending.

"I believe you should come away refreshed and inspired after reading a book. Despite my best efforts, sometimes life just stinks. Bad things happen. I need and want an outlet, an opportunity to relax and escape to a place where obstacles are met and overcome."

Combining, History, Humor, and Romance with an emphasis on Faith, Friends and Good Clean Fun, Kim's stories are written to remind us how God can use adversity to strengthen us and draw us closer to Him and give us the desires of our heart in ways we may never expect.

~o0o~

Connect with Kimberly Grist



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~o0o~

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I offer my appreciation to Covers and Cupcakes L.L.C
for the cover design for my novel.

DISCLAIMER

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Formatting by Fury Cover Design

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